



## If we can find some light by LiaGwriter

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**Summary:** It's been six months since El escaped from the lab and found Jim Hopper, the local police chief who takes her in. He gets her a job at Benny's Burgers, where she'll be safe during his three weekly night shifts, and the scarce customers won't ask questions. And they don't - until one night, a boy with kind eyes comes in, wondering why he's never seen her around Hawkins before. [AU]

# 1. Chapter 1

*Hello, loves - after a very long season of one-shots, I am back with my second multi-chapter fic!*

*I have exercised heroic self-restraint and have been waiting for what feels like way too long to post this, so I'm beyond excited to finally share it. I really hope you enjoy the first chapter! (I've shared some key info in the end notes, so don't miss those)*

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*Hawkins, Indiana - 1987*

It was the third slam of his parent's bedroom door that finally did it.

Mike gritted his teeth as the force of it reverberated through the house, no doubt waking his little sister Holly and interrupting his already fitful homework session.

"I can't believe I have to go over this *again!*" his mom shouted, her voice notably hoarse. His dad's response was faint as Mike heard them clamber down the stairs, attempting to move the argument to a part of the house that no one would be able to hear them from.

Which was useless — Mike almost always heard; the full-blown fights and the day-to-day bickering, both of which seemed to be getting worse lately. Even the rare times he couldn't hear them, he could feel tension emanating through the house, any misstep a potential trigger to set them off again.

And Mike was sick of it.

He thought he'd gotten good at ignoring them. It was junior year, and between school and his friends he was busy, meaning that apart from nighttime, he was rarely home for long stretches anymore — not that his parents noticed, anyway. It wasn't just that their arguing had increased lately, but that they seemed to care less about whether Mike or Holly heard them.

His older sister Nancy was away at college, lucky to be spared from

the battleground the Wheeler house had become. But he kept her updated via their regular phone calls, during which she always told him the same thing: "Just get out of there when they're at it, Mike. It's not a good environment."

The thing was, Mike *knew* his parents weren't happy together. The hints of it that he'd noticed as a kid solidified when he became a teenager, and his general awareness of people and relationships grew. It became clear that their marriage was one of convenience, the core problem being the fact that his dad was basically checked out: not just from his mom, but from Mike and his sisters, too.

Mike saw rare glimpses of fatherly love, which, if he was being honest, came across more like begrudged duty. Sometimes he tried to engage Mike in conversation about things like sports, or future career prospects — both topics Mike cared very little about — so the dialogue was always stilted, awkward.

Ultimately, Mike wasn't sure what to make of his dad; he didn't know whether to be angry, or annoyed, or just plain sad about their less than ideal relationship. Most of the time, he ended up blocking those feelings out, just like the fighting, because allowing it in was too complicated.

It was evident, though, that everything had become intolerable for Mike's mom, and this was what the fights seemed to be centered around. Listening to them, even Mike knew it was a losing battle: he wasn't confident his dad would ever change, and his mom seemed to be realizing that, too.

Hovering over everything was the loaded word he hadn't heard either of them utter, at least not yet: *Divorce*.

Despite how frustrated the fighting made him, deep down Mike wanted both of his parents to be happy — and he knew that if it didn't stop soon, the chances of them being happy *together* were slim. But divorce meant change. It meant him and his sisters shuffling back and forth during holidays, dealing with custody agreements, and, worst of all, the potential of leaving Hawkins. Mike wasn't particularly attached to the boring small town he'd grown up in, but it was where his friends were, and he was sure he wouldn't survive

somewhere new without them. Nevermind the fact that an imminent move would mean he'd have to start senior year elsewhere, an utterly terrifying prospect.

So he was in limbo, then, listening to his parents argue every other night, trying to focus on homework as he wondered what all of it was going to amount to.

Mike sighed, staring down at the sloppy equations he'd scrawled so far for his chemistry homework. There was a lot more to get through, and it was nearing 10 o'clock. Just then he heard the sounds of footsteps charging back up the stairs, and he grimaced as his mom's voice rang out again.

"I am *not* doing this anymore, Ted! I'm not!"

Her words were followed by yet another jarring slam of their bedroom door, and in a burst of frustration, Mike threw his pencil down and stood up from his chair. Acting on instinct, he reached for his backpack on the floor next to him and started loading books into it, Nancy's voice echoing in his mind: *Just get out of there when they're at it.*

He had pressing things to get done, and his parents had stopped taking note of when he left the house anyway. Enough was enough.

He hurried down the hallway, halting when he got to Holly's bedroom door. He opened it just a little, squinting in the glow of the nightlight that was always plugged in by her bedside. He released the breath he'd been holding when he saw that she was fast asleep. Even though she seemed fine, he felt a pang of guilt for leaving her alone in the midst of his parent's fight.

*When was I **ever** nervous to leave my little sister at home with them before all of this?*

The thought made him angry, fuelling his descent down the stairs and out the front door. The old station wagon he'd been given when his mom got a new car was parked at the end of the laneway as usual, and he was glad, knowing the sound of the engine would be too faint to hear from inside the house.

Mike could feel the tension leaving his shoulders as he turned off his street, and another wave of resentment passed over him. Nancy was right: it wasn't a good environment, and his parents were supposed to make it feel safe and comforting, the way a home should be — and theirs had been, at one point.

He hadn't thought about where he would go, and as he turned onto Main Street, he ran through the options for this time of night. In a town like Hawkins, the list was short, and since Mike wasn't old enough to go to a bar, there was really only one option: Benny's Burgers.

It was the local greasy spoon diner, a go-to spot for when him and his friends were craving fries and milkshakes after school. It wasn't exactly a short drive away, and Mike had never been there late at night, but it was worth a shot.

He sighed, turning the radio dial up as he sped towards the outskirts of Hawkins. "Benny's it is," he muttered to himself.

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The coffee was almost finished brewing, and El busied herself with wiping down the front counter as she waited. As usual, the handful of customers in the diner were either people working night shifts, or truckers doing long distance drives; both groups in need of caffeine at late hours.

Most of her shifts were pretty slow, and this one was no exception. Benny was in the kitchen working on some food orders, leaving El to get through her usual chores: sweeping around the register, replenishing condiment bottles, organizing the drink fridge, and so on. All menial tasks requiring little thought, which El liked — it was nice to have simple things to focus on for a while.

That was the whole point of this job, anyway: to keep El safe and distracted while Hopper worked the late shift at the police station three nights a week. Although he'd never said it, she suspected one of the goals was also for her to learn to socialize, get acquainted with the conventions she missed out on while she'd been... in that place.

*The lab*, El thought reflexively. Hop had suggested she start referring

to it as 'that place' in an attempt to dissociate from it, strip it of its sinister meaning — but that was proving to be harder than she imagined. Spending nearly 17 years of your life somewhere, however horrible, didn't exactly make it easy to forget.

But she was trying.

She sighed, refocusing on the task before her. The job *had* been good for that, helping her build something that resembled a normal life, even if she was still mostly hidden away in Hop's cabin when she wasn't at Benny's.

The diner's evening shift roughly lining up with Hopper's hours at the station was ideal, but it also served another purpose. The customers that came in from 8 p.m. to midnight were either regulars (that Benny usually sat and chatted with), or strangers passing through Hawkins; people that wouldn't ask questions about El. Plus, it meant she wouldn't be alone in the cabin at night, and if anyone from that place showed up at Benny's, Hopper was close by at the station and on high alert.

It was a makeshift solution that, so far, had worked just fine.

As one of Hop's longtime friends, it had been easy to convince Benny to let El work there. He didn't know the truth, of course, but he was sympathetic to the story Hop invented: that, acting on a tip, he'd rescued El from an abusive home, which had to stay discreet because some of her family members had evaded police and might be looking for her. He said it was temporary; that he was just taking care of her until someone could formally adopt her, and although El knew it was a lie, that part still stung. She'd been living with Hopper for half a year now, and it was more of a home than she ever imagined. The idea of leaving it, and him, was painful.

It took a while, but El had grown accustomed to the easy bustle of those three quiet evenings at the diner; chatting on and off with Benny, but keeping her infrequent conversations with customers short and polite. It was what Hop had cautioned, after all: *Don't get too chummy with anyone, kid. We can never be too careful.*

So she did just that — kept to herself as she tried to push away the

omnipresent fear that someone could come for her at any moment and disrupt this halfway-life she'd started to build.

Some days were harder than others. With all that she now knew, it wasn't exactly the kind of life she would've chosen; being confined between two places, and having to keep her interactions with people limited. There were so many things she wanted to understand through experience, not just read about in the books Hop gave her, or watch on the small TV in their living room. Still, this was more freedom than she'd ever known, and it was a good life, far better than she thought she'd have in her worst moments of despair. Despite its limitations, she was grateful.

The little bell above the doorway chimed and El flinched, unaccustomed to that sound anytime after 10, when the already slow stream of customers usually diminished entirely. She glanced up from behind the counter to see a boy shuffling inside, a large backpack slung over one of his shoulders.

From her vantage point she could see that he was *tall*, at least a foot or so more than her, and he looked to be about her age. El watched as he did a quick scan of the diner, and when he ran a hand through his unruly mop of black hair, an unfamiliar knot formed in her stomach. He was... *beautiful*, she thought — there was no other word for it.

He moved toward a booth that was isolated from the other customers, and the knot twisted tighter as El realized that, with Benny still working in the kitchen, she was going to have to serve him. She rarely served customers; Benny usually handled that, probably because he could sense how nervous it always made her, and it was safer that way, too.

But no one remotely close to her age had ever come in during one of her shifts, let alone a boy her age; a beautiful one, at that. He began setting up a stack of books on his table, and El knew it would be rude if she waited any longer to bring him a menu. She wiped her hands on the half apron around her waist and tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear, taking an even breath.

She walked over to his table, coaching herself through the advice

Hop continually gave her: *Just smile, and be polite if you have to - that's all.* He didn't seem to notice her approaching, still taking things out of his backpack and sorting them on the table top. It wasn't until she was standing right over him that he looked up, his dark eyes widening at first with surprise and then something more, something El couldn't read.

"Hi," she said, placing the menu on one of the few spaces that wasn't occupied by his things. She smiled in what she hoped was a friendly way. "Welcome to Benny's Burgers."

The boy frowned, looking down at the menu as though it were a foreign object, and then back up at El with that same unreadable expression in his eyes. "Um... thanks," he replied, his eyes darting away from her as he reached for the menu.

"Would you like something to drink? Maybe some water?" she asked, running through the usual script.

The boy cleared his throat, flipping through the first few pages of the menu. "I - yeah, water would be good. I kinda wanted a coffee, but I guess that probably isn't a good idea," he said, glancing at the black calculator watch on his wrist.

"Oh, I could make some decaf," El offered. She'd have to dig out the decaf beans from the back storage unit, grind them up, and run a whole cycle with the coffee pot, but something about him made her not mind the extra work.

He looked up, eyes suddenly alight. "Really? That wouldn't be too much trouble?"

El shook her head. "It'll just take a little bit longer than the regular stuff, if that's okay."

The boy was already nodding. "Sure, I don't mind. Thanks."

"No problem."

El smiled at him again before turning to head toward the kitchen, grateful for the chance to be shielded so she could collect herself. Those dark, gentle eyes, the smattering of freckles across his nose and

cheeks, his soft smile... she was definitely blushing.

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*Great, well done, Mike thought, Can't even order coffee from a pretty girl without staring at her like a total creep.*

He sighed and stretched his arms above his head in an attempt to recalibrate, but he couldn't stop his eyes from flitting to the kitchen doorway to see if she'd emerged yet.

Who was this girl? He was sure he'd never seen her around Hawkins — he'd remember if he had. Which was interesting, because she appeared to be around his age, and he'd been to Benny's plenty of times. Granted, never past 7 p.m. on a weeknight, so maybe he'd just missed her normal shift hours; and that was a shame, because.... wow, was she ever pretty, and kind, too.

Relax, you've barely spoken to her, Mike told himself, straightening up in his seat and turning his attention to his chemistry homework. He tried to work through one of the problems, but he kept glancing up every few seconds, hoping to catch a glimpse of her coming back out into the dining area.

It was almost enough distraction to make him forget why he was at Benny's in the first place, but the bitterness over his parent's fight and the thought of Holly at home in the midst of it still lingered, tightening painfully in his chest.

After a few more failed attempts to write out equations, Mike heard the kitchen door squeak from across the room. He looked up to see the girl walking through it, a bag of coffee beans cradled in one arm. She settled behind the front counter, her back turned as she began loading the beans into the grinding machine. Mike felt bad that she was doing all that extra work just for his one cup of coffee. He looked back down at his papers, figuring he probably shouldn't make it worse by continuing to stare at her.

Still, he started to feel nervous at the thought that she'd be coming back to his table shortly, and he grimaced at the obvious fact of his limited experience talking to girls. At school, him and his friends were firmly holding the collective position of *total nerds*.

Even though Nancy kept reminding him that arbitrary social hierarchies shouldn't have any bearing on his chances with the opposite sex, it still seemed to put a firm rift between him and the vast majority of girls at Hawkins High.

But maybe Benny's was kind of like a blank slate, a place where his low rung on the popularity ladder wasn't as obvious, or at least wouldn't be to this mystery girl. Maybe he could attempt to be the kind of person who confidently struck up a conversation with a pretty girl, and if it went horribly wrong, well... he just wouldn't come back to the diner at this time ever again.

Feeling satisfied with this quasi-plan, Mike glanced up to find the pretty girl in question walking up to his table, a steaming mug in one hand. He took a breath, smiling at her.

"Thanks again," he said when she placed the mug down in front of him, "I really appreciate it."

She didn't reply, instead fishing into the pocket on the front of her apron for a small notepad and pen. "Did you want to order some food?"

Mike didn't. But he also *really* didn't want her to leave the table just yet, so he reached for the menu. "Oh, um... maybe," he said, feigning interest as he flicked through the pages. "What's your favourite thing here?"

There was a pause and he cringed internally, hoping he hadn't made it too obvious that he was stalling. He chanced a look at her and found that she was frowning, her expression making it seem as though she'd never contemplated the question before.

After a moment she smiled down at the table, as though the answer made her shy. "I... like the waffles," she said quietly.

"Waffles?"

She nodded. "They're really good."

Mike always went for fries or milkshakes at Benny's — he was pretty sure he'd never even looked at the breakfast menu — but it was all he

had to go with. "Is there a time limit on these waffles, or would you be making another exception for me?"

He fought the urge to squeeze his eyes shut in embarrassment. That was by far the flirtiest sentence he'd ever attempted, and it was about *waffles*.

Luckily, the girl didn't seem to mind, or even notice. "We make them at any time," she replied, "Mostly because I'm the one eating them."

Mike folded the menu up and handed it to her. "Well then, I'm sold. Waffles it is."

She gave that shy smile again, still not meeting his eyes. "Won't be long," she mumbled before heading back toward the front counter.

Mike sighed. He hadn't exactly gotten to the striking up a conversation part yet, but at least she'd be coming back when the waffles were ready. He was in the clear for the time being, so he went back to his chemistry homework in earnest.

It didn't take him long to get into the rhythm of it this time, and he moved through the problems quickly, lulled by the comfort of solving things with ease. His home life may be sad and confusing and his skill at talking to girls minimal, but at least he had his mind; his love for learning and knowledge, and the temporary cloak of security it gave him.

He was finishing up the last two problems when a sweet smell began to waft through the restaurant, causing him to look up — it had to be the waffles. He watched as the girl pulled a plate down from the kitchen counter and began making her way toward him.

She was definitely right — he hadn't even tasted the waffles yet, but they looked amazing; thick and toasted to a perfect golden colour, with generous servings of whipped cream and syrup in small stainless steel dishes on the side of the plate. Though he hadn't really been hungry when he came in, he was suddenly starving.

He realized she was scanning the table for a place to set the plate down, and he scrambled to clear some of his books and papers away.

"Oh - sorry, here," he said, making some room in front of him. "Homework's always getting in the way, huh?"

He waited for her to laugh or maybe say something in agreement, but when he looked at her, she just wore that same shy half-smile.

Although there were increasing signals that she didn't seem interested in talking to him, Mike decided to chance it anyway. "So, um, you don't go to Hawkins High, do you? I've just... I've never seen you before."

She met his eyes for a brief moment before looking away, which gave Mike enough time to reconsider how he'd phrased the question. "Um, I mean - sorry, that probably sounded weird. It's not like I keep track of everyone at school, or whatever, I just... you know, Hawkins is pretty small, and I thought..." Mike trailed off, sure that he'd given her enough room to fill in the blanks, though she still seemed uncertain.

"I'm, um... I'm homeschooled," she said finally.

Although that made sense, Mike still wondered why he hadn't seen her around town, even — most people his age tended to hang around the same few places. But he didn't want to ruin anything with another probing question, so he just nodded.

"Homeschooled - that's cool. So you probably don't have to deal with as much homework then, right? Or is it just kind of *always* a thing, because your school stuff is all at home already?"

She frowned, and he mentally scolded himself for how dumb the question came across. He smiled sheepishly, watching as her expression shifted from confused to something that looked more like... sad. Distant.

"It's alright. Not too time consuming, I guess," she replied, looking away again. "I don't mind it."

Mike nodded with probably too much enthusiasm, given her hesitation. "Right, that makes sense. It's probably pretty sweet that you get to just wake up whenever you want and stuff. And you don't

have to like, get ready, or walk to school - sounds awesome to me."

The words brought a smile back to her face and Mike was relieved, returning it in earnest. "Yeah, I - it's nice." There was a pause, and then she motioned to the waffles. "Wouldn't want you to eat those when they're cold, so... enjoy."

She hurried away before Mike could say anything, and he slumped back in his seat, dejected. Polite as it was, she clearly just brushed him off, or at least wasn't interested in carrying on a conversation.

He thought he'd been friendly enough, if not a little awkward, but... oh well. He couldn't blame her for not being interested. Besides, how much more could he have said if she wasn't really giving substantial responses?

He looked down at his watch, which read 11:15. The diner closed at midnight, and he was done with the more urgent parts of his homework. He stared down at the plate of waffles, which seemed to have lost some of their appeal — there was nothing to do but eat them and go home.

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The girl didn't come by his table again; she was occupied, flitting around the front area of the diner with a rag and some cleaning spray. Mike numbly made his way through the waffles, passing the time by flipping through his agenda to review assignments and due dates.

When he was done, he pushed the plate forward and began to pack his bag, noticing that he was the only person left in the place. He saw that the girl had gone behind the main counter again, her back turned as she dug through a drink fridge.

Mike decided to bring his plate up to the counter, which he tried to convince himself was just common courtesy, and not a final bid to see her cute smile one more time.

He approached quietly, not wanting to disturb her, but when he set the plate down she turned, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Just, uh - thought I'd save you the trip," Mike said, pushing the plate forward a little.

She stepped toward him to reach for it, and Mike couldn't help but stare, *again*. She'd pulled her shoulder length brown hair back into a ponytail, making her soft hazel eyes stand out, the slight dimples in her cheeks somehow more prominent.

"Thanks," she said, setting the plate down on a ledge below. "Were they good?"

In all honesty, Mike had hardly noticed the taste of them, the experience dampened by his failed attempt at a conversation with her. But he grinned anyway, flashing a thumbs up. "They were excellent. Top notch recommendation."

She fidgeted with the front of her apron before looking up at him. "I'm glad you liked them," she said, and Mike noticed a hint of warmth in her voice that hadn't been there before.

He took it as an invitation to say what he'd been wanting to before she walked away earlier. "I'm Mike, by the way," he blurted.

The girl looked surprised, but then she shook her head quickly, like she was willing herself back into the moment. "Nice to meet you, Mike. I'm El."

They looked at each other, and before Mike let himself become a staring idiot again he cleared his throat, slinging his backpack over both shoulders. "Well, um, maybe I'll see you again sometime? I might have to come in for another dose of those waffles."

He was hoping the words would make her smile, but instead her features shifted into that same sad, distant expression she'd had before at the table. "Maybe," was all she mumbled in reply.

He nodded slowly. "Alright, well... Take care, El."

Feeling deflated, he headed for the door, but he only made it a few steps before he heard her call out to him.

"Mike?"

He turned around so quickly that he almost stumbled. "Yeah?"

"Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. That's when I'm here, usually. From 8 p.m. until close."

It was just basic information, but Mike felt a blush creep up his neck. If she wanted him to know her hours... maybe that was a sign it hadn't gone as poorly as he thought?

"Cool," he replied, trying not to let his excitement over this development show. "Well, I'll see you on one of those nights, I guess."

She nodded, raising her hand to wave at him. "Have a good night, Mike."

He grinned back at her, hardly able to believe this lucky turn of events.

"You too, El."

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*I saw a post about fanfic on Tumblr recently that was like, 'Not everything is a coffee shop AU!' - and it made me laugh to myself as I posted this, because this chapter totally makes it seem that way, doesn't it?*

*While there will certainly be a lot of the fluff/mutual pining that we all love in said coffee shop AUs, I can assure you there's a lot more to this story. If you're familiar with my other fics, then you'll know that I enjoy more close-up character study type stuff, and that's what a lot of this fic will be grounded in - with some action, angst, and excitement too, of course. A big part of my inspiration for this fic was to write an arc for El that has to do with finding herself, dealing with past trauma, and asserting her inner strength and independence. So, if that's something you're interested in - plus the falling in love with Mike part, of course - then I hope you'll enjoy this story!*

*As always, I'm on Tumblr at maplestreet (formerly writer-lia, if that's what you're familiar with), so don't hesitate to come chat with me, or drop me a line about Mileven, this fic/my writing, or*

*anything Stranger Things related. See you in chapter 2!*

## 2. Chapter 2

*Hi everyone! So, here we have what I like to call the Necessary Set-up Chapter - no fluffy Mileven (apologies to my fellow die hards), but some important development regardless. Thank you to everyone who has reviewed/favourited/followed this story so far. If you leave a review with questions, or one that's particularly detailed/thoughtful, I will happily respond to it in the author's notes at the beginning of the following chapter.*

*So, to TorontoBatFan: I think this chapter will answer your question ;)*

*\*A quick content warning for mentions of El's abuse in the lab, and some mental health stuff - please be aware if those things may be difficult for you.*

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El rested her cheek against the cool window of Hopper's Blazer, letting her eyes drift shut. Their rides home from the diner were usually quiet, both of them tired from their respective shifts and content to sit in silence.

But for the first time, that silence gnawed at El. A troubling mix of worry and guilt whirled through her mind, and she hugged her arms tightly across her chest, sinking lower in her seat.

She broke the rules.

She wasn't supposed to talk at length with customers — or with anyone, for that matter — let alone share personal details with them.

Not only had she told Mike that she was homeschooled, (though probably not in the way he imagined), but also her exact hours at the diner each week, which she knew was a mistake the moment the words left her mouth.

She couldn't really explain it, but as she watched him head for the door, something strange had happened. When the idea that she might never see him again became real, a force came over her so strongly

that it impeded the ability to reason. She didn't think. Her whole life up until then had been a practice in restraint; being told when she was allowed to speak, to ask questions, to say what she needed and felt.

And in a single moment, after mere minutes in the presence of someone she knew virtually nothing about, all of that had unravelled.

Even as the guilt lingered, the thought of his name — *I'm Mike, by the way* — made her smile. He'd just been so... kind. That had to be the reason she slipped up; that, and the fact that he was friendly, and beautiful, too.

Still, she remembered what Hopper preached: that people could seem that way on the surface and then turn out to be dangerous, in one way or another. *You can never really trust someone*, he often reminded her.

Was this how weak she really was, then? A somewhat friendly boy showed up at the diner, and that was all it took for her to break one of their most important rules?

But beneath all of that, a voice — the one El recognized as her own, untainted by anyone from the lab, or Hopper, even — told her Mike was *good*, an attribute that radiated from him even in the simple interactions they'd had.

That was maybe the only benefit of having been embedded with so much evil for so long: it gave El a sensor that recognized the opposite right away, a keen ability to detect honesty and truth in its purest form. That instinct had allowed her to trust Hopper, after all, that night he found her stumbling through the woods.

Mike had it too, she was sure of it.

It was a nice thought, but El's heart sank as she realized it didn't really matter. What would come of it, anyway? He would come into the diner again, and they'd talk some more? Become friends, maybe?

Her inner voice, however hopeful, told her that as much as she wanted that — ached for it, thinking about his sweet smile and gentle

eyes — it wasn't possible.

It wasn't just a mistake to tell him about her shift hours, but it was foolish, too. Even if he did come in again, she'd have no choice but to keep it all polite, short, surface level. She'd have to shut him out, like she was supposed to.

The thought was so upsetting that she bit the inside of her cheek, sighing to try and ward off the urge to cry.

She felt Hopper's eyes on her, roused by the sound.

"Everything okay, kid?"

A small part of her wanted to tell him. Maybe he would say that it wasn't a big deal, that she was allowed to chat with a nice boy her age if she wanted to, so long as it didn't go anywhere — but those hopes were quelled the moment they rose up.

She didn't want to lie, but disappointing Hop would be worse; he'd already done enough, risked so much to keep her safe.

"Yeah, I'm just tired," she replied.

"Any customers give you a hard time?"

For some reason the question upset her more. She thought of Mike's voice when she'd offered to make him some decaf coffee — *Really? That wouldn't be too much trouble?* — and the adorable way his eyes had lit up.

She pursed her lips, frustrated by how silly it all was.

"Nope," was all she could manage to reply.

"Good," Hopper said, reaching over to nudge her shoulder affectionately, "Because no one better mess with you."

It was something that normally would've made her laugh, or at least smile — but she just shrank further into herself, keeping her eyes trained on the darkness ahead.

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By the time El was ready for bed, she could hear the distinct sound of Hopper's snores coming from behind his bedroom door. It probably should have annoyed her by now, but she still found it comforting; it served as a reminder that she wasn't alone, that someone would come for her if she needed help.

At first, she didn't want to sleep in the other bedroom, which had confused Hop. Real privacy was a luxury she'd been denied for too long, and he figured she would be excited to have a space to call her own. But the idea of being enclosed in four walls, even just for sleep, was too jarring for El in the beginning, when she was still overcome with fear.

To remedy this, for two whole months they both slept in the living room; El stretched out on the couch, and Hopper on an old cot across from her. That was when she'd gotten used to the snoring, his measured breathing — it helped calm her on nights when sleep wouldn't come.

They were both a little sad when El finally worked up the courage to move into what was now her bedroom, having grown fond of their living room sleepovers. But it was the right thing. *Progress*, Hopper had said.

Plus, it gave her the privacy she needed for her nightly ritual; which was something he didn't, and couldn't, know about.

She was more tired than usual tonight, the helpless thoughts of Mike draining her energy in every sense, but she couldn't skip it. She promised herself she'd try for as long as possible, until she either lost hope or the will to continue, whatever came first.

After checking to make sure the door was locked and Hopper's snores were still in a steady rhythm, she reached under her bed for the empty can of his Schlitz beer that she'd plucked from the trash a while ago.

She placed it on top of her dresser, situating herself a few feet in front of it. She took a deep breath, rounding her shoulders and adjusting her posture so she was standing at full height.

After closing her eyes for a moment to gather herself, she raised one hand and stretched her fingertips toward the can, palm facing the floor.

With as much concentration as she could muster, she zeroed in, frowning as she tried — with her mind, the way she'd been able to before — to crush it.

*Three, two, one*, El chanted in her head, the strategy she'd been taught in the lab that she still couldn't let go of. *Three, two, one, come on.*

After a few more tries she dropped her hand, sighing as she flexed her fingers. Nothing. Just like the preceding few months.

Still, she tried.

Following the routine, she returned the can to its hiding spot, reaching next for the small pink radio on her nightstand. She knelt by her bed and felt under the mattress for her makeshift blindfold, a strip cut from one of Hop's old t-shirts, and tied it around her head to cover her eyes.

Turning the knobs until all it emitted was static, she placed the radio behind her on the bed, sitting with her back against it so that the sound was close enough to focus on. Breathing deeply, she tried to let go of her mind, to visit the place she'd been before — the blank space. The void. The backdrop into which she could arrive anywhere, witnessing her surroundings without anyone or anything aware of her presence.

But like every night since *that* night, there was nothing. Just the crackling of radio static, and the soft lamp light coming in through the thin fabric covering her eyes.

The disappointment of it felt heavier than normal, and when she pulled the blindfold off she was surprised to find that she was blinking away tears from her vision.

She looked around the room; at her haphazard drawings tacked to the walls, and the old record covers Hop put up as an attempt at decorating. Her favourite flannel shirt draped over a chair in the

corner, a stack of books on top of the dresser. All signs of a life, of someone with people — or at least a person — who loved them.

But all El felt was empty.

A sob wracked her body and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it, not wanting to wake Hopper. She leaned over sideways until she was curled up on the floor, the tears coming faster now.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't be anything. She *wasn't* anything.

---

*"What good is she without them? She's nothing but a liability now, Dr. Brenner."*

*El pressed her ear against the door, straining to hear the voices out in the hallway. She wasn't exactly sure who the other two people were, but Papa's voice was distinct.*

*"We can afford to wait a little longer," he said, "I have a feeling that if they do come back, they could be stronger than before."*

*Someone made a noise of dissent and El heard Papa shush them. She held her breath, afraid to make even the slightest sound.*

*"I doubt that's going to happen, Dr. Brenner. Her strength seems to be gone entirely."*

*Papa sighed. "Subject Eleven is our only success, the only one who's survived our training. We won't give up just yet."*

*An awful chill crept up El's spine. She always asked about others like her to no avail, and now she knew why Papa never answered — no one else had made it this far.*

*The hallway was silent, and El wondered if they'd walked away, but then she heard Papa speak up. "Two more weeks. We'll give it two more weeks, and if her powers don't resurface, we'll get rid of her. We can talk about how when we come to it."*

*No one spoke after that.*

*El stayed in place, listening to their footsteps fade as they made their way down the hall and away from her room.*

*She lingered for a few moments just to be sure they were gone, and when she finally stepped back from the doorway, she realized how badly she was shaking. Her breathing became laboured, as though the air in the room was rapidly disappearing. She stumbled back toward her bed, collapsing onto it and wrapping her arms around herself as she began to rock back and forth, the way she always did when she felt herself shutting down like this, when the worst of the fear and despair set in.*

***She was useless. She was a liability. They were going to get rid of her.***

*Though she'd been denying it, deep down El knew this already, judging by the look on Papa's face each time they brought her into the examining room that week — each time her regular drills were halted as she continually failed to summon her powers.*

*On the nights that she could work up the strength, she'd been trying, alone in her room, focusing as hard as she could on snapping something as small as a pencil crayon until her head began to ache from the effort.*

*She closed her eyes, remembering the night it all went wrong.*

*Papa had brought a small white cat into one of the exam rooms, one similar to the pictures he'd shown her from a book the week before.*

*An anxious feeling had pooled in El's stomach, knowing what he wanted before he even spoke. He'd been hinting at it all week long — "We want to see just how strong you are, Eleven."*

*It had only been a year or so that the physical aspect of her telekinesis had ramped up, to the point where she could throw furniture across the room or crush objects with the flick of her head or hand.*

*Before that, her main strength had been the void; her ability to look for and spy on whoever they showed her pictures of. But El could sense that this new development in her powers was what Papa really wanted. The month before, when she accidentally broke a guard's wrist after he grabbed her too hard, he had pulled her close and whispered that he was*

*proud.*

*"No," she'd cried to him that night, watching the cat pace in its cage.*

*El couldn't do it — she wouldn't. It was sick, and wrong, and she knew that with a strength and certainty that sunk deep into her bones.*

*At first Papa thought she was holding off on purpose and he scolded her, his cold hand gripping her forearm as he tried to coax her.*

*But it was like a part of El's nervous system had suddenly shut down, like the sinister request turned off a switch inside her, the mix of her resolve and disgust causing everything to falter.*

*"I can't," she'd sobbed, confused and overcome, "I can't."*

*Papa didn't believe her. In the end he got fed up, tearing the wires from her head and yanking her out of the room, down the long hallway that led to the place El despised more than anything; the cold, dark cell where her pleas for help went unheard for days.*

*She'd cried and screamed as he carried her, but she didn't have the strength to fight him like she normally did. She remembered how loudly the door clanged as he slammed it, how angry and flat his voice was as she scrambled toward it.*

*"You'll stay in here until they come back."*

---

El wasn't sure how long she'd been laying on the floor, but eventually the hardwood became uncomfortable enough to prompt her to crawl up onto her bed. She burrowed under the blankets, exhausted in a way that made her feel completely blank.

Each time her attempts failed, the hushed words from that night echoed in her mind — *Liability. What good is she?* — haunting her, regardless of how much time had passed.

Still, each time, she reminded herself that it had taken years for her powers to gain strength, and it could take just as long to get them back. But with that thought also came the sense that something specific was keeping them inside, like she just had to keep trying

until she unlocked the right combination that would allow everything to come flooding back in.

As much as she believed that, imagining what it would be like also scared her. The physical part of her powers had often felt chaotic; random bursts of strength she could only slightly control. She didn't have the chance to get a real handle on them before they disappeared, and she had no way of knowing what would happen if they did come back.

El took a deep breath as she turned onto her side, pulling the comforter tighter around her body.

Just as she was about to let the exhaustion take over, she remembered that there was still one part left to her routine. Sitting up a little, she reached over and opened the small drawer on her nightstand, pulling out the scuffed leather bound journal she kept there.

Hopper had given it to her early on, along with a suggestion: that she use it to record her thoughts, whenever they got too confusing or overwhelming. He said putting them down on paper could make them feel less powerful, like they were being temporarily offloaded somewhere else.

He was right. El wasn't always diligent about it, but when she did take the time to write, she always felt better afterwards — except for when she filled in the tally.

She flipped to the back, where a cluster of pencil marks were scrawled along half of the second last page. To anyone else they would look like random scribbles, but El knew their purpose: to keep track of how many days she'd been trying to get her powers back.

After drawing a small dash in the next blank spot, she looked down at the page for a moment, as though it held some kind of secret message. Then, letting the pencil move before she could think, she wrote something underneath it:

*Mike.*

Maybe it was because she didn't have anyone to tell, and writing his name solidified her memory of the night, made it more permanent somehow. Maybe she wanted a way to look back and know, with this strange way of tracking time, the exact day she met him.

Maybe his name made her feel something — something like hope.

There was a loud creak from behind the wall next to her and El flinched, her heart racing before she realized it was just Hopper rolling over in bed. Taking a shaky breath, she snapped the journal closed and returned it to its place, turning off her bedside lamp before laying down.

Sometimes it felt like it would never go away, the guilt she carried in nearly every waking moment. Guilt over losing her powers, even though she was sure it wasn't her fault. Guilt over hiding her attempts at getting them back from Hopper, who would be angry that she was trying something that, if successful, had the potential to put them in danger.

Guilt over wanting her powers back in the first place. Guilt over having a home, and someone who truly cared for her — things she sometimes wondered if she really deserved.

Maybe that's what it was about Mike, about those few stolen moments she allowed herself around him. In his eyes, she was just a girl working her shift at the diner, and because of this, El imagined herself to be that way: someone with a past that didn't matter, and a future that wasn't defined by fear, isolation, or restraint.

Someone who could smile at a beautiful boy, and not have it laden with sadness for what could never be.

---

"Have you guys ever been to Benny's late at night?"

Mike purposely waited until he was behind the wheel to pose the question, so he could focus on the road, and not all of his friends' quizzical looks.

They were on their way to school, seated in their usual formation:

Dustin in the front, and Will, Lucas, and Max in the back.

Mike was the first to get his license, and ever since he inherited his mom's old station wagon, they'd upgraded from biking to school to having him drive, which was an improvement on many fronts. Their reputation as nerds certainly wasn't helped by the fact that they routinely rolled up to Hawkins High on the same bicycles they'd been using since they were kids.

Mike and the three boys had been best friends since they were little, and Max had joined their Party — as they referred to it, in traditional Dungeons and Dragons terms — in eighth grade, after her and Lucas had started dating.

High school hadn't made the slightest dent in their crew; though they all had casual friends from classes or extracurricular activities, the Party was as close as ever.

Mike could tell they were all seriously contemplating his question.

Dustin was the first to speak up. "I don't think so. Driving all the way out there at night would be kind of scary."

"Yeah, because you can barely see over your mom's steering wheel," Lucas retorted, which garnered a laugh from everyone.

Dustin twisted around to face the backseat. "Watch it, Lucas. At least I don't drive recklessly above the speed limit and risk all of us getting *killed*."

"That was *one* time!"

"Can you two stop?" Will interjected, "It's too early for this."

Mike heard Max pipe up from her spot in the middle seat. "I don't think any of us have been there late, as far as I can remember. Why do you ask, Mike?"

He sighed, still unsure how he wanted to phrase his answer. He knew the instant he mentioned a girl they'd all pile on and start teasing him, and although there was probably no way to avoid that, he wanted to mitigate it as much as possible. Especially because he

genuinely wanted to know if any of them had ever seen El, at Benny's or otherwise.

"I was there last night," he began, "Around ten thirty or so. And there was this girl -"

"Wait, why were you there so late?" Will asked.

Mike sighed. Though they all knew to varying degrees about the situation with his parents at this point, mentioning it still made him uncomfortable.

"My parents were fighting again, and I was trying to do homework and got fed up," he mumbled.

The car went silent and Mike cringed, angry yet again at his parents for being the cause of uncharacteristic awkwardness amongst his friends.

He cleared his throat, desperate for the moment to pass. "Anyway," he said, "There was this girl working there, and I was wondering if any of you have ever -"

"Oooh, a girl?" Dustin cut in, "Our age? Was she cute?"

"Excuse me," Mike replied, "I was asking a question, and you very *rudely* interrupted."

Dustin reached over and clapped a hand on Mike's shoulder. "Right, you were going to ask if any of us had ever seen her before. But in order to answer that, we'd have to know what she looks like - hence, the question about whether she's cute or not. I'm two steps ahead of you, Mike."

"Fine, yes, okay, she's really cute, but that's beside the point -"

"Depends on who you ask," Dustin muttered.

Mike ignored him and continued. "I think she's around our age, average height, brown hair that's kinda curly. Her name's El?"

The car was silent again as the rest of the Party considered it. "She's

homeschooled," Mike added, thinking that might help.

"How do you know?" Will asked

"Because I asked if she went to Hawkins High," he replied.

Max leaned forward, sidling up to Mike's right shoulder. "So you had like, a real conversation and everything?"

"Don't sound *too* surprised," Mike replied, rolling his eyes, "And I guess so, not really. She seemed kind of shy, or something."

"Wow," Max said, "Mike Wheeler haunting Benny's Burgers late at night to hit on cute girls, who would've thought!"

"Oh please," Mike said, his voice rising a little, "Like Lucas didn't hang around your locker for a whole month waiting for you to give him the time of day."

The Party erupted in laughter, and in the midst of it Mike heard Lucas mutter something along the lines of, "He's not wrong."

He smiled to himself, waiting for everyone to quiet down. "So none of you have seen her anywhere, then? El?"

Dustin spoke first, still giggling a little. "Why do you keep saying her name like that?"

"Like what?"

"I dunno, like... all dreamy and stuff."

"*Dreamy*? Come on, what are you -"

"Oh my god," Dustin said excitedly, and from the corner of his eye Mike saw him throw a mischievous glance toward the backseat. "Guys, look how much he's blushing! You *totally* have a crush on this girl, don't you?"

"What? No, I never said -"

But it was no use. Within seconds, the Party had started up a chant —

*Mike has a crush! Mike has a crush!* — so loudly that he had to turn up the radio dial in an effort to drown them out.

When it finally died down into a fit of collective giggling, he shook his head, sighing with defeat. "You guys are walking to school from now on."

"Awh come on, Mike, we're just joking," Lucas said, "You *never* talk about stuff like this, we're just excited for you."

They pulled up to the Hawkins High parking lot, and Mike was glad to finally be able to get out of the car and away from their teasing.

"To answer your question, I don't think any of us have seen her around," Will said as they all shuffled out.

"Yeah, but we better meet her soon," Dustin cut in, walking around the car to give Mike a good natured pat on the back. "Gotta see if she's a good fit for our Paladin."

Mike groaned, blushing in spite of himself. "Remind me to make sure that never happens."

They headed toward the main doors and Mike fell into step next to Will, who he noticed was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Everything okay, with your parents and all that?" he asked, once they were out of earshot from the others.

Mike glanced at him quickly. He thought he'd made it seem nonchalant when they were in the car, but Will always had a way of detecting what was going on beneath the surface.

"Yeah, it's still the same, I guess," he answered, shrugging a little. "I just got tired of listening to them last night. I decided to start taking Nancy's advice, and just get out of there when it gets bad."

Will nodded. Of everyone in the Party, Mike knew he understood the best, having had an abusive father that walked out on their family when Will was young.

"Well, at least you know you can go to Benny's," he said. He caught

Mike's eye and smiled, reaching over to nudge his arm. "Especially now that there's a cute waitress to crush on."

Mike just rolled his eyes again — even Will, apparently, wasn't above the silly teasing.

They made their way inside, catching up with the rest of the Party as they all shuffled into the crowded front entrance. Mike bid everyone goodbye before they each headed in the direction of their lockers.

The usual noisy bustle of mornings and Hawkins High faded into the background as Mike weaved through the hallways, lost in thought.

It struck him as odd that none of his friends knew who El was, or even had an idea of where they might've seen her before. He wondered fleetingly if last night had all been a dream, but the image of her deep brown eyes and dimpled smile rang as clear to him as ever. It felt like a strange mystery only he was privy to, this pretty girl at Benny's that no one else seemed to know anything about.

He'd have to go there and see her again — just to make sure she was real.

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*So, first reveal - El lost her powers while still in the lab, but a very lonely and confused part of her wants them back... hmm. And the Party, well, they never let Michael Hearteyes Wheeler off the hook, do they?*

*Next chapter, we come back to flirty/mutual pining Mileven - with an increasingly conflicted El - which makes for an interesting mix. Please leave your thoughts; some of the comments from the first chapter actually encouraged me to flesh out this one a lot more, so it's more helpful than you know! As always, I'm on Tumblr at maplestreet, so feel free to come along with comments/questions/feels about this fic, Mileven, or anything Stranger Things related. Thank you for reading :)*

### 3. Chapter 3

*Happy Sunday (or whatever day it is for you), loves! Here's a healthy dose of fluff/mutual pining to hopefully soothe any residual feels from the last chapter. Enjoy!*

*tank03 - I was so glad to see your name pop up again in the reviews! I really hope you're enjoying this so far, and that you like where it's headed!*

---

Mike sat hunched over the old card table that the Party used for D&D campaigns, a cluster of papers spread before him. He usually opted to do homework at the desk in his room when it got this late, but he figured staying down in the basement would make it easier to slip out when he wanted to go to Benny's.

His parents weren't fighting tonight; or if they were, he couldn't hear them, for once. Unlike last time, he didn't technically have a reason to leave, but... *I want to see El* he thought, for what was probably the twentieth time that night.

He glanced at his watch — it was just after ten.

Would she think it was weird if he showed up at pretty much the same time he had on Tuesday? What if she found it creepy that he actually remembered her shift hours? And would she buy the guise of him being there to do homework, or would it be totally obvious that he'd gone just to see her?

It felt silly to be having those kinds of thoughts about a girl he'd barely spoken to, but there was *something* about El, something he couldn't pinpoint that made him want to know more.

Plus, he was even more intrigued after learning that none of his friends had seen her around before. After the collective teasing that had gone on yesterday, he knew they were going to ask about her again... so he might as well find out something he could tell them, right?

After pausing to make sure it was still quiet upstairs, he gathered his things and headed for the basement door, closing it behind him with a soft click.

For the first time, he was actually grateful that his parent's arguing had made them pretty much oblivious to his whereabouts most of the time. They were fairly lenient to begin with, but driving all the way out to Benny's Burgers late at night under the premise of doing homework probably wasn't something they'd be thrilled about.

The truth was, the idea of seeing El had given Mike something to look forward to, a welcome distraction in those handful of tense or awkward hours he'd been at home since Tuesday night. And distraction was, after all, what he desperately needed in those listless moments.

So that could be it, then. Mike didn't want to get his hopes up that anything could or would happen with El, but at the very least, a trip to the diner was a far better alternative to sitting at home in the midst of either fighting or an uneasy silence. It was just a healthy distraction, that was all.

He spent most of the drive to Benny's trying to convince himself of it.

---

El was in the back storage area when she heard the faint chime of the front door bell, signalling that someone had entered the diner.

She was filling a tray with cans of pop, but the noise made her pause, her mind immediately echoing with the phrase she'd been turning over her whole shift so far: *Maybe it's Mike.*

Sighing, she mentally scolded herself again for how much the resolve she vowed to uphold was already starting to crumble. In the two hours since she'd arrived at the diner, a wave of anticipation had washed over her each time the front door opened, only to dissipate when it wasn't him.

She glanced at Benny, who was perched on a stool next to the prep area, frowning at a long sheet of paper.

He looked up at her and gestured toward the door. "You okay to get that? I just have to finish up these purchase orders."

El nodded, tucking the tray of cans under one arm as she headed out to the front.

She pushed the swinging door open with her hip, craning her neck toward the doorway as she stepped out — only to find that her instincts were right.

*Mike.*

He was standing by the entrance, thumbs looped through his backpack straps, the warmth of his smile reaching El quicker than lightning.

She stopped so abruptly that a can of Coke went flying off her tray, landing on the ground in front of her with a hard smack. There was a sharp hiss, and then the dark liquid began to trickle out and spread across the floor.

"Shit," she muttered, setting the tray down on a counter and twisting around to look for the nearest rag.

Mike was still standing a few feet away and El felt her cheeks burn, worried that it was obvious that his presence had caused the blunder. She hoped he'd go and sit down so she could get a hold of herself, but just as she was bending down to wipe up the spill, he approached.

"Hey, uh - hi, El - are you... did you need some help?"

*Why does he have to be so nice?*

El stood back up and chanced a look at him. Over the past 48 hours, she tried to convince herself that she was inflating it all in her head, how beautiful he was.

It took half a second to realize how laughably untrue that was.

Not even two minutes had passed, and the odds of her being able to resist talking to him were *not* looking good.

"Hi, Mike," she managed, smiling at him. "I'm okay, thanks. You can just go have a seat, wherever you like."

He seemed disappointed, and El felt bad — but it wouldn't be appropriate to let a customer behind the front counter, and allowing Mike to do so would break all the rules and then some.

"Will do," he replied, and she watched as he walked over to the same table as before.

She crouched down and began wiping up the spilled Coke, grateful for the chance to get back to her senses.

If just the sight of him made her fumble like that, what would a whole conversation do? What kind of chaos would unfold if she got close to him and saw that constellation of freckles up close? *That's not going to happen*, she reminded herself, *It can't*.

She finished cleaning up, steeling herself as she grabbed a menu and walked over to Mike's table. *Short and polite*, she thought, *Nothing more*.

He was thumbing through a book, his brow slightly furrowed in concentration. When she placed the menu down he looked up, smiling so sweetly that she felt her resolve ebb away even more.

"Everything okay back there?"

El just nodded. "Did you want some coffee again? Decaf?"

She watched as he registered her cold demeanour, his smile fading so rapidly that it hit El like a punch in the stomach. He pursed his lips, like he wanted to say something else in response to her question but decided against it.

"Sure," he replied. "Sure, decaf would be great."

El turned away quickly, not wanting to linger; looking at him for any length of time would make shutting him out even harder.

She headed back behind the counter, remembering that she'd set aside a bag of decaf coffee beans so that in case Mike did come back,

she wouldn't have to go digging through the storage area again.

The sight of them made her shake her head. Why had she allowed that kind of preemptive hope, when him returning wasn't going to change anything?

She distracted herself with making the coffee, and was setting the machine to percolate when Benny appeared from the kitchen. He scanned the dining area before walking over to El.

"So that kid's back again, huh?"

El followed Benny's gaze to Mike's table. "Yeah," she replied, squatting down to look for a clean coffee mug.

In her peripheral vision, she noticed Benny nodding. "He's been here before — comes in with a group of friends after school sometimes. Never seen him here this late, though."

El made sure to keep her face neutral, but the information gave rise to a strange mix of emotions.

It was odd to know that hers and Mike's paths had been running somewhat parallel, but had never crossed until now. Thinking about him hanging out at the diner with friends served as a grim, but important reminder that his life was normal in a way hers had never been, and would probably never be.

Benny handed El a mug from one of the shelves she couldn't reach, and she smiled in thanks.

"Nice kid, for sure," he said, "He's the only one of the group that ever leaves a tip."

He headed toward a table full of his regulars after that, leaving El with the task of bringing Mike his coffee and taking his order, both things she'd been hoping to avoid. But there was no other choice — she'd just have to make it as quick as possible, so it wouldn't hurt as much.

She gathered the mug in both hands and headed to his table.

---

Mike had to admit the odds weren't looking great.

El's shyness from Tuesday was definitely still there, but this time there was a cold tinge to it, like she was annoyed by his presence or something.

Though he couldn't think of why, he wasn't necessarily surprised; Mike didn't consider himself suave, or charming in the typical sense, or even... particularly interesting, for that matter.

He squeezed his hands into fists, trying to halt the insecure thoughts before they took him down an inevitably dark path. He tried to remember what his friends and Nancy often said to him in these moments: *You're a great guy, Mike. Stop sabotaging yourself.*

He'd been looking forward to seeing El for two days now, and he wasn't disappointed in that sense — she was *way* more beautiful than he even remembered, and just looking at her made the rest of his surroundings seem dull.

*But I'm not here to stare at her like a creep,* Mike thought, *I actually want to **talk** to her.*

He spent the last portion of the drive to Benny's working up the courage to do this; testing out potential conversation starters, things that might help break through her shy exterior.

Though it felt kind of ridiculous, he reminded himself of the revelation he'd had on Tuesday: that Benny's was a free space, where El wasn't aware of his social status, or poor flirting skills. Maybe, he told himself, *maybe* he could at least practice, gain some of the confidence he knew he needed.

Mike glanced at the front counter and saw that El was coming toward him with a mug in her hands.

There were two options. The first was that he could bail on all of this, chalk it up to a fleeting distraction from his problems at home, and never show up again during one of her shifts. The second was that he could try to talk to her, like he *really* wanted to, and see what came of it.

What was the worst that could happen? She'd rebuff him completely, and then, like he'd also realized on Tuesday, he would just never return to Benny's after ten. Simple as that.

He sat up a little straighter, smiling at El as she set the coffee down. He was still clutching his book in one hand, readying himself for the line he'd settled on.

"Would you like anything to eat?" she asked, gesturing to his unopened menu.

Her tone was still cold — robotic, almost — and although Mike knew he should be deterred, he went for it anyway.

"Oh, I'm okay, thanks. But, um, I would like to order..." he trailed off, holding up the book and pointing to it with his other hand. "Your opinion on *Lord of the Flies*?"

El had been reaching for her notepad, but at his words she froze.

She studied the book cover for a moment before she shook her head. "I... haven't read it."

*Alright, so that didn't work*, Mike thought, setting the book down on top of his papers.

"Oh, okay, uh - no worries. Sorry, that was a lame joke. It's just, I have a report on it due for English class in a couple weeks, and I normally love reading, but I'm really struggling with this book for some reason. Probably because all I read are fantasy novels, which I guess is kind of -"

El's silence stopped him, and he bit the inside of his cheek as a blush began to creep up his neck. Rambling was one of his bad habits, and it got even worse when he was nervous.

He shifted awkwardly, and was trying to think of something to say when she replied.

"I'm not sure I could help much," she mumbled, "Sorry."

"Well," Mike began, rushing to get the words out before he lost his

nerve, "If you have a minute, maybe - maybe I could tell you about it, and get your impression that way? I mean, I'm only about halfway through anyway, and sometimes hearing a fresh perspective helps."

For the first time that night, El met his eyes. Mike couldn't quite pinpoint her expression; she seemed conflicted, but that distant sadness he'd noticed before was there, too.

"I don't think I can," she replied, an air of disappointment in her words. "I have some things to do around there." She motioned to the front area, which, to Mike, didn't exactly look like it needed tending to.

The signs were clear: *She doesn't want to talk to you, so stop being a wasteoid.*

Still, he couldn't help but fixate on that hint of disappointment, figuring it wouldn't hurt to try one last ditch effort. It was either that or finish the coffee as quickly as possible, leave, and probably never see her again — and that option was not at *all* appealing.

Mike looked at the front counter, at the four high-top stools perched at one end, the usual spot for the early morning breakfast crowd.

"Right, I see," he said, pointing at the stools. "What if.... could I sit over there, maybe? That way you can work while I tell you about the plot, and I - I'll make it interesting, I promise. Then maybe you won't be as bored, or... or something."

The words didn't come out quite as confidently as he'd hoped, but he still managed to smile at El as another unreadable expression passed over her face.

There was a pause long enough to make Mike want to backtrack and tell her to forget about it, but then finally, she spoke.

"Okay," she said, her eyes downcast again, "You could do that."

Mike's smile broke into a full-on grin. *Alright*, he thought, *Progress*.

"Great," he said, gathering up his papers as he began sliding out of the booth. "Lead the way."

---

It was far too easy to quiet the alarm bells going off in El's head — the ones telling her that she was blatantly ignoring the rules — when Mike was talking to her.

She'd never seen someone so *animated*; his dark eyes dancing with excitement, hands gesturing wildly, his voice undulating with dramatic tones.

The difficult part had been allowing this to happen in the first place; giving in to his gentle persistence and the fact that for whatever reason, he seemed to really want to talk to her.

She knew the instant he asked for her opinion on the book that it was a losing battle, but still, she'd struggled. If she said yes, it could go somewhere she couldn't predict, somewhere that could be dangerous, even though her instincts told her that wouldn't happen.

In the end, it wasn't because she couldn't say no to him (although the way he looked at her at the table certainly made it difficult) but because she couldn't say no to herself. The tricky part now wasn't that she was breaking the rules by talking to him in the first place; it was that she knew, with more certainty than she'd ever had, that she never wanted to stop.

And that was going to be a problem.

But she could forget that so quickly just by looking at him, stealing glances as she polished cutlery behind the counter and listened to him describe *Lord of the Flies*.

El didn't let on how little she knew about the book, or literature in general. It would be too embarrassing to admit that she was still struggling through the second book in the *Anne of Green Gables* series, the first set of novels Hopper had given her.

"So the thing is, it's kind of getting interesting now, because there's division among the group," Mike said, "About what they should do for food and shelter and stuff."

El's eyes passed over his form as he leaned forward on the counter.

He was wearing a beige knit sweater with a dark green pattern across the chest, and it looked so cozy, the ideal thing to have on for the chilly mid-October evening. She wondered just how warm it was, what it would feel like to be wrapped up in his arms and have the heat of him so close. She imagined letting her cheek rest against his chest, how nice it would be to just -

"El? Are - are you listening?"

His words brought her back to reality, and she ducked her head slightly to hide her blush. *Get a grip*, she told herself, polishing the fork in her hand a little more vigorously.

"Yes - sorry," she mumbled, "So they can't decide what the plan should be, for how to survive?"

"Right," Mike replied, "They're just kids, so they're used to having adults tell them what to do."

"What about their parents? Aren't they looking for them?"

There was a pause as Mike considered this. "That's a good question, actually. I mean, it's sort of implied that any adult died in the plane crash at the beginning, but I'm sure the parents back home are probably freaking out. This one kid Ralph keeps saying that the 'grownups' are going to come for them, but some of the boys think that's a waste of time."

El considered this. She could relate to both sides: having the hope of an elusive *someone* out there plotting your rescue, only to have it fade away, leaving bitterness in its wake.

"Right," she said, "It would be hard not to hope that someone was looking for you, especially if you're scared."

They were still talking about the plot, but the words felt personal, like she'd just revealed something she wasn't supposed to. Mike's eyes were on her and she avoided looking up, afraid of what she'd find if she did.

"Yeah, that's true."

He cleared his throat, and El could tell he was choosing his next words carefully. "So, your parents - they don't have a problem with you working so late?"

*Shit.* They'd been talking about the book for a while and although it was natural for the subject to change, El hadn't prepared herself to discuss anything else. And the unnerving thing was, she *wanted* to, even though it definitely wasn't allowed.

She shrugged in response, deciding it was best to just glaze over it. "Not really. Because I'm homeschooled, I don't have to worry about waking up early and all that."

Mike nodded. "Oh, right, yeah - that makes sense."

"What about you?" El asked, quick to divert any further questions, "Your parents don't mind you being out late on a school night?"

When he didn't respond right away, El looked up to find that he seemed lost in thought. He leaned an elbow on the counter, resting his chin against one of his palms.

"Well... they don't know I'm here, actually," he said after a while.

El raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Really?"

Her heart sank as she watched his eyes darken, like she'd reminded him of something hurtful.

"Yeah," he said, his voice quieter, "They're kinda... distracted, I guess."

El wanted more than anything to ask why, to listen to him and do what she could to quell that sadness in his eyes. But that might lead to a conversation she couldn't really have, and she knew it wouldn't be fair to ask him to open up when she couldn't give anything in return.

It felt wrong to pivot back to talking about the book, but she wasn't sure what else to do.

"I see," she replied, nodding as though she understood. "So maybe for

part of your report, you can write about the different approaches the boys have to survival," she said, "And what that says about... the way people think."

Mike still seemed distracted, but when she caught his eyes for a moment, he smiled. "Now that," he said, reaching for one of the papers in front of him, "Is a great idea."

El smiled to herself as he jotted things down, his pen scribbling quickly across the page.

When he was done he looked at her, his eyes alight again. "I knew you'd be able to help. You're a genius, I can tell."

That made El laugh loudly enough that a customer nearby turned to look. She shook her head, flushing with embarrassment.

"I don't know about that," she said shyly.

"Awh come on, give yourself some credit," Mike said, "Besides, I'm usually right about these kinds of things."

*Trust me*, El wanted to say, *I wish you were right about me*. But she only shrugged in response.

Mike leaned toward her further, a playful smile on his lips. "So, *genius* - what's your take on how the plot's going to develop? I mean, I know a little bit, but I wonder..."

---

The rest of El's shift passed like this: Mike chatting away, sometimes wanting her take on things, or posing questions.

El struggled to respond to most of them, not because of how much further she was straying from the rules — although that *should* have been the thing causing distress — but because she realized that she'd never genuinely been asked what *she* thought about something.

Sure, her and Hopper shared their opinions, bantering about the latest episode of *Miami Vice* or arguing over what music to play in the car, and sometimes he asked for her input on basic things. But even with him, certain key choices were already decided for her; mainly

how much she was supposed to stay in the cabin, and how little contact she was allowed to have with anyone at or outside of Benny's.

In the lab, of course, she'd had no choices at all.

So to be asked, *What do you think, El?* in the most sincere way, by someone who was truly interested in the answer, wasn't just new, it was nice. *Really* nice. It was something she could definitely get used to, something that made her feel like.... Herself. And the fact that it was Mike asking her what she thought, well... that was a whole other aspect.

Each time he tilted his head and smiled, waiting so patiently as she stumbled over her words, she felt the air shift; like an invisible force was winding itself around her limbs, beckoning her closer to him, and not just in the physical sense.

El nearly flinched when she heard Benny emerge from the kitchen, and Mike seemed jolted by it too, sitting upright quickly on his stool.

They'd been so engrossed in conversation that she hadn't bothered to check the time, but it was nearly midnight. The diner was empty, and El realized she hadn't even noticed the few other customers clear out.

Benny gave a noticeable glance between the two of them before nodding in El's direction. "I'm nearly wrapped up with all the kitchen stuff. You good up here?"

El nodded, and then he disappeared into the back again. She couldn't help her disappointment as she saw that Mike had started to pack up his things.

"I better get going," he said, sliding off the stool. He studied her for a moment, a worried look on his face. "I hope I didn't distract you too much."

El shook her head. "You didn't," she told him, even though it had taken her twice as long to get through her regular list of duties.

Mike looked at her briefly before glancing down again, like he was working up the courage to say something else.

"Speaking of that," he started, "I... I really like talking to you, El. But I don't want to come in here and - I don't know, be a disturbance or anything while you're working. I can just... I mean -"

"You're not," El blurted, the words rushing out before she could think. "You're not a disturbance at all, I - I like talking to you, too."

Mike looked surprised, and she knew it was because it was the most unguarded she'd been all night. She tried to ignore the way her heart hammered nervously, a warning: *You're not being fair to him.*

"Oh. Well, that's - that's good," he said.

He tucked his hands into his backpack straps, rocking back and forth on this feet, and El could see how much he was blushing.

"I guess I'll see you next week, then? Monday?"

Too afraid of what else she'd let slip, El just nodded.

Mike was beaming at her now. "Great. I look forward to hearing more of your genius ideas."

It was El's turn to blush. "I'll do my best," she replied, hardly able to look at him.

There was a pause, and then Mike gave her one last smile before heading for the door.

"See you, El," he called back, turning to wave.

She waved back. "Night, Mike."

When he was out of sight, she turned and began tidying the countertop right away, sure that if she didn't busy herself, the overwhelming mix of guilt and excitement would make her unable to think straight.

She'd done the exact opposite of what she was supposed to, what she'd promised to, and yet... it felt so right, like the easiest thing in the world. Too easy.

El had never felt anything like this; an energy that coursed through her whole body and gave her a profound sense of awareness, like she was on edge, but not in an entirely bad way.

It wasn't the same as what she'd read in books, where it always seemed to be about *falling* — in love with someone, or for someone, or into someone. If anything, in the short amount of time she'd been around Mike, she felt balanced, as though her center of gravity was being pulled in the right direction.

She was buttoning up her coat when she saw the familiar headlights of Hopper's Blazer pull into the parking lot, right on time like always. After poking her head into the kitchen to say goodbye to Benny, she hurried out into the cold night.

Hopper leaned over and opened the passenger door as she climbed in, and like usual, she reached across the console to hug him before settling into her seat. It was always so comforting, being pulled into his embrace; his rough beard tickling her cheek and the smell of cigarettes clinging to his Hawkins P.D. uniform.

"Good shift?" he asked as they peeled out of the parking lot.

"Yep," El replied, keenly aware of needing to sound as normal as possible. There was more to keep from him now, and the guilt over it was already winding its way through her chest. "What about you?"

Hopper sighed. "A few calls about some vandalism, but other than that it was quiet, like usual."

"That's good," El replied, huddling up against the side of the door.

"What was Mike Wheeler doing in there so late?"

El froze. She resisted the urge to turn in her seat to look at Hop, not wanting to seem too eager.

"Who?" she lied, keeping her eyes trained on the window.

"Mike Wheeler - he's a kid about your age. I saw him pulling out of the parking lot just before I turned in."

*So he didn't see us talking*, El thought, relieved.

She could feel Hop's eyes on her, but she was still too nervous to look in his direction. "How did you know it was him?"

"Hawkins is pretty small, kid. I've seen him around before."

"Oh yeah?" El asked, figuring it was better to feign mild interest than none at all.

"Yeah," Hopper said. He chuckled to himself for a moment before continuing. "Actually, I busted him and his friends once about a year ago, when they were trying to get into the high school after hours. Said they just wanted to use the radio equipment, or something."

A familiar feeling came over El, the same one she had when Benny mentioned that Mike had been to the diner before with his friends.

"Oh," she said after a while, too tired and overwhelmed to think of anything else.

She could sense that Hopper wanted to say more, and she silently willed him to hold off. She didn't have the strength to conjure up more lies, more disinterest, when it was clear to her that she felt anything *but* that for Mike.

To her relief, Hopper leaned forward to turn up the radio dial, and a slow song El didn't know filled the car. She tucked her feet up onto the seat, listening as they drove through the dark.

When she closed her eyes, she saw images of Mike; him and his friends in a booth at Benny's, laughing and talking as they shared fries and milkshakes, or sneaking around the outside of their school, sharing in the thrill of doing silly teenager things.

He had a life — one El was far from familiar with.

She wondered how long it would take for him to sense that something was off with her; that they lived in entirely different worlds, even if it didn't seem that way on the surface.

But El didn't want to think about what would happen then. She

wanted Monday night, with Mike standing in the doorway, smiling at her as though nothing else mattered.

She could pretend to be whoever he saw her as, at least for a little while.

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*Is it really a Mileven fic if El doesn't at some point marvel at Mike's 'constellation of freckles'?*

*Please leave me your thoughts. As always, I'm on Tumblr at maplestreet, if you'd like to come say hi. (Seriously, don't be shy - interacting with readers is the whole reason I started my blog in the first place). Thank you for reading and see you next chapter!*

## 4. Chapter 4

*Hi loves! Just want to note that there are brief mentions of El's abuse in the lab right at the beginning of this chapter, before the first line break - so be aware of that if it might be difficult for you.*

*disneyprincess315: I know, right? Three chapters in and they seem to be steadily building towards something... but I have a feeling it may not be that easy. Thank you for your review!*

---

*El's fingers trembled as she felt around for the damp rag in her pocket. It was soaked in the substance she'd taken out of an exam room, from an amber bottle with the name she recognized from when they'd used it before, to subdue her when she wasn't cooperating.*

*She hoped she'd wetted it enough for it to work on the guard who sat across from her, looking bored as he reviewed something on a clipboard in his lap.*

*The truck bounced and jostled, and El secured herself against the pile of boxes stacked next to her. They'd smuggled her out in a regular supply truck, with just enough room for her and one guard to tuck in against the sliding back door — which would luckily make it easier to get out when the moment came. Though it would be more difficult, she'd have to do it while they were moving, so as not to raise suspicion.*

*And she had to do it soon. She knew they were heading somewhere remote, somewhere, as she heard Papa murmur late one night, "Where no one would think to look for a body."*

*Her body.*

*She assumed the lab was near some kind of civilization, and El guessed that her chances were better if she could get out while they were still relatively close to it. She studied the guard carefully, securing the rag in her fist as she took an even breath, her heart hammering wildly in her chest.*

*In one swift movement she lurched forward, shoving the rag against his*

*mouth and nose. His shout of surprise was muffled, and he clasped his hands around El's wrist, trying to wrench her away. But it was too late; the substance was taking hold, and she watched in terror as his eyes began to droop and his grip on her went limp.*

*She waited another full minute just to be sure, and then, her body coursing with adrenaline, she reached for the key ring on his belt loop. Once it was in her hands she shuffled over to the sliding door, desperately searching for the right key, her efforts stymied by the truck's movements.*

*Nothing was working, and her desperation grew with each second, fear rising in her throat as she tried and failed to open the door. Just then the truck slowed, coming to a halt within moments, and she heard a door slam as a voice she recognized called out -*

El jolted upright, heaving for breath as she scrambled to register her surroundings.

Though she was clearly in her room at Hop's cabin, it took a few moments to be convinced. She grasped at the sheets tangled around her, kicking them off as she sat up all the way, her pulse still jumping in her throat.

"Just a dream," she murmured to herself — a variation of the same one she'd been having at least a couple of times a week since Hop took her in. She always woke the same way; gripped with fear, sure that it had all been real.

It was as though her mind was testing out alternate versions of the night she escaped, each dream featuring a different twist that lead to it all veering in the wrong direction.

In one of them, she felt in her pocket for the rag, only to realize she'd forgotten it. In another, the guard had been able to fight her off, pinning her down before she could smother him.

She always woke up before she got to the end of the story, the realization of her greatest fear; what would've happened had the plan not worked and she stayed in the truck until Papa came for her, leading her to a dark field somewhere, her fate sealed.

But it hadn't been — and El reminded herself of this as she laid back down, placing her hand over her heart in an attempt to soothe its erratic pace.

Everything had gone exactly the way she'd planned for it to, after that night when she heard Papa talking to the others outside her door.

The guard had been knocked out with minimal struggle, she found the right key for the truck's door on the third try, and after lifting it just enough for her body to fit through, she'd tumbled hard out onto the pavement.

There was no time to register the extent of her injuries — after scrambling to her feet, and without any idea where she was, or where she was going, she'd sprinted into the woods at the edge of the highway. She ran for nearly half an hour before she collapsed, a searing pain in her head and the throbbing of her muscles forcing her to stop.

She remembered how silent it was, the bright moon casting fractured shadows through the trees as their branches creaked in the wind. She remembered rolling onto her back and looking up at the sky for the very first time — that neverending expanse of darkness dotted with pricks of sparkling light. It was so beautiful that she'd gasped, and then sobbed; an immense relief wracking her body as she laid there, aching and bloody, but for the first time in her life, *free*.

She could have stayed there forever under the light of the moon, but she was hurt, and cold, and she knew she had to find some kind of shelter. So she'd risen to her feet, staggering slowly on until she saw a faint yellow glow piercing through the dark.

Hopper's porch light.

Everything happened quickly after that.

He told her later that he'd been unable to sleep that night, and was sitting outside smoking a cigarette when he heard her approaching. Having lived alone out there for a while, Hopper said he'd grown used to the sounds of the woods, and her human footsteps were

distinct.

El hadn't replied when he called out and asked who was there; she was only half conscious, unable to make her voice loud enough to call back. The last thing she remembered before passing out in Hopper's arms was how he smelled; like cigarettes and woodsmoke, a smell she would come to associate with safety. With home.

El shifted onto her side, tuning into the sounds of him snoring in the next room. So much had gone right that night, and she couldn't imagine what might have happened if Hopper hadn't found her, let alone been willing to take her in.

If it weren't for him, she might never have been able to see the sky again.

---

"Wait... you mean to tell me you've never seen *Ghostbusters*? Like, not even once?"

El laughed and shook her head. "Nope. Not even once."

It was a Monday night, coming up on almost three weeks of Mike visiting El during each of her shifts at Benny's.

His presence had become a comfort, and she looked forward to it each time; the way he'd walk in the door and smile at her, taking up a seat at one of the high stools like it had been his spot for years. And it felt like it had — it felt like she'd *known* him for years, and now that Mike Wheeler was a fixture in her life, she wanted it to stay that way.

Which, of course, was a problem; just like the fact that she was right about never wanting to stop talking to him.

But like that second night, any notion of needing to shut him out, because getting close to anyone wasn't allowed, well... it all fell by the wayside when he looked at her, when he asked her a question and made her feel like what she had to say was important.

Despite this, there was a clear imbalance; El definitely knew more about Mike than he did about her, which was intentional. It wasn't

that he didn't ask about her personal life, but that she always skated over the answers when he did, or diverted the conversation to something else. Mike clearly sensed this, and after a few visits he stopped doing it entirely, which El should've been relieved by, but... despite everything, she still wanted him to know her.

But he couldn't, not in the way she envisioned — and since she was already breaking the rules by talking to him at all, she figured she better uphold at least some of what she'd promised Hopper.

Most of the time, they settled for talking mainly about Mike's life: what kinds of movies he liked, who his friends were, what he did after school. He'd get El's input on things when he could, describing new books and asking her which one he should read, or telling her about the assignments he was struggling with (which was rare; Mike, she learned, was *really* smart).

All of it made El both incredibly happy and hopelessly sad, aware as she was that the three visits a week were all she could have of Mike; and even those could be put in jeopardy if Hopper found out.

She wanted more, in every sense. And if her instincts were right, she was pretty sure Mike did, too.

His last few visits had been different in a way El couldn't discern. He seemed more nervous when he talked, and sometimes during a lull in conversation he appeared distracted, like he was turning words over in his head that he wasn't sure how to say.

El knew that feeling, but there was something more to it; like each pause was a precipice they were both standing on, waiting to see who would jump first.

It was like that tonight, El laughing again at Mike's incredulous reaction to the fact that she hadn't seen *Ghostbusters*.

"That's - that's a travesty! Trust me, you are *really* missing out, I mean..." he trailed off as El ducked down behind the counter, looking for a jar to dump some coffee grounds in.

She heard him clear his throat. "I have it on tape at home, actually,"

he said, the words coming out in a slightly higher pitch, "We should - we could watch it sometime."

*I would love to*, El thought reflexively, and she bit her lip in an attempt to stop the words from escaping.

She was grateful he couldn't see her face, because she knew she'd turned beet red. Her mind raced frantically as she stayed below the counter, pretending to still be looking for a jar. She wanted more than anything to spring back up to her feet and say yes, but she couldn't.

*Just brush it off*, she thought bitterly.

"Yeah, maybe," she muttered. She stood up after a moment, gesturing to the kitchen without meeting his eyes. "I just need to ask Benny if he has anything for the coffee grounds," she said quickly, hurrying away before he could respond.

She made a beeline for the storage area, needing a spot that was shielded from everything, and quiet. When she got there, she turned to rest against one of the large freezers, closing her eyes as she leaned her head back.

A thought that had been hovering in the back of her mind since that first night came to her again: *You're not being fair to him*.

It was true — she wasn't. But she also wasn't able to explain why she couldn't do something as simple as watch a movie with him, or anything simple at all, for that matter. She didn't know what she would do if this kept happening — if he hinted at wanting something more, *anything* more, and she had to keep brushing him off.

A different thought arose then: *He'll give up eventually*.

El's eyes pricked with tears as the reality of what that would mean settled over her. She wanted to believe that Mike wouldn't give up so easily.

Though it would make everything harder than it already was, she hoped she was right.

---

"Alright, walk me through this again - *why* haven't you asked her out yet?"

Mike sighed as he slouched down in his seat. It was lunchtime and the Party was huddled around their usual table, evidently intent on grilling Mike about what had been deemed 'The Diner Girl saga'.

"Well, I did, *kind of*, I tried -"

Lucas held up a hand to stop him. "What do you mean 'kind of'?"

"She said she'd never seen *Ghostbusters*, so I said, 'Oh, I have it at home, we should watch it together sometime' - or, yeah... something along those lines."

From her spot next to Lucas, Max let out an exasperated groan, throwing her head back dramatically. "That's not *asking her out*, Mike! That's offering to let her watch a movie in your basement."

"But, I mean, I - I think that counts... right, guys?" Mike glanced around at the rest of the Party for support, only to find that they were all wearing similarly unimpressed looks.

"Mike," Max said, shaking her head in disappointment. "I say this with love, but you are hopeless sometimes."

"Oh come on, that's not fair! I *did* say that -"

"Ah - hold on a second, let me finish," she interrupted, "If you really like this girl, you can't be that casual. You have to ask her on a *real* date."

Mike crossed his arms, sighing as he realized that Max was right (though there was no way he was going to admit that).

It *was* kind of lame that he'd only gotten as far as mentioning watching *Ghostbusters* in his basement. But El still seemed so shy, and he didn't want to come on too strong — especially when she hadn't had the most enthusiastic reaction to his suggestion. Regardless, he really, *really* did want to take her on a date.

He turned to Max. "So what do you suggest, then? Going out to a

movie instead?"

She frowned. "Hmm, I don't know... you said she's pretty shy, right? Having to be quiet at the movies probably wouldn't be ideal."

She was right again, but Mike didn't let on.

Dustin piped up from across the table. "What about the arcade?"

Max smiled, leaning over to nudge him on the shoulder. "Now *that's* what I'm talking about," she said, turning back to wink at Lucas. "That's where Lucas took me on our first date."

She fell back against him and he pulled her into an embrace, eliciting a collective groan from the rest of the boys. It was a habit they'd started in eighth grade whenever Max or Lucas showed any PDA, and they kind of just never stopped, always up for a chance to tease the two of them.

"That's right," Lucas said, ignoring them and smiling proudly. "Perfect date spot. Fun games, lots of opportunity for healthy competition, a few dark corners..."

"Gross," Mike muttered as rolled his eyes, "That's your selling point?"

Lucas shrugged, gesturing to Max. "Worked for us, didn't it?"

That made them all laugh, and although Mike had been annoyed at first, he was grateful for the help.

He leaned forward, smacking his hand against the centre of the table in a declarative manner.

"Alright," he said, looking around at his friends, "Arcade it is."

---

The monthly delivery truck had come by earlier that day, and though El normally didn't mind the laborious task of sorting the new shipment, this time she resented it beyond measure. It meant she didn't get to stay behind the front counter and spend her whole shift talking to Mike, like usual.

Instead, she had to go back and forth whenever she got the chance, getting small doses of him to tie her over — which was especially torturous, because he looked extra cute that night. His unruly black hair was a little more tame than usual, and a crisp dress shirt peeked out from the collar of his light green sweater, making his dark eyes even more pronounced. It made for an image El wanted to memorize, one she knew she'd think of later.

El had started to think about Mike a *lot* — or, more accurately, dream about him. It always played like a film montage: the two of them holding hands, walking in a sunny field; cuddled up on the couch at the cabin, watching a movie, or, El's favourite so far — them lying next to each other under the night sky, both looking up in wonderment.

The defining feature of each one was freedom, everything she didn't and couldn't have; the ability to be with Mike however she wanted to, with no lies or guilt.

She must've been letting the effects of these dreams show, because Hopper had started to notice that something was up.

He'd seen Mike's car leaving the parking lot again last week, and when he mentioned this to El, she mumbled something about how she'd seen that he was doing homework. When Hop asked if she'd spoken to him she said she had, a little bit; and though it was definitely an understatement, it felt good to have a small portion of the bigger lie off her chest.

Still, El expected him to be upset by it, but instead he'd just kept looking over at her as they drove home, his expression cautious, almost scared.

"El," he'd said, his voice gentle, "You know you can talk to me, right?"

She'd almost let everything out then, his tone luring her into a sense of security. But she held off. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if something's bothering you, or you just have stuff on your mind, you can tell me about it."

El could hardly keep the nerves out of her voice. "Does it seem like something's bothering me?"

Hopper had just shrugged, and El could sense that he felt uncomfortable. "I don't know, kid, it kind of feels like you've just been more... withdrawn, lately."

She didn't mean to keep parroting questions back to him, but she didn't understand what he meant by that. "Withdrawn?"

Hopper had glanced at her, smiling a little when he leaned over and ruffled her hair. "Yeah, you know, in your head too much. Quiet."

He was right, and El wondered if denying it would only make him more suspicious; so in the moment, she'd decided to give a small portion of the truth. "I guess I've just been thinking more lately, about... about how things are."

"How things are?" Hopper had asked.

"Yeah, you know, like me staying hidden and stuff, and - and all the rules."

Though El had been afraid that she pushed it too far with that, Hopper had just sighed, like he'd been expecting her to say that.

"Look, I know it sucks, trust me," he'd said, "But it has to stay like this, at least for a little while longer. I want you to be safe."

"I know."

"And our rules have done that so far, right? Kept you safe?"

El hadn't been able to look at him, even though he'd nudged her when he said that. "Yeah," she told him, even though she wasn't really sure if she believed it.

Their rules had certainly kept her shielded, but safe was beginning to mean something else to her.

A few minutes later Hopper asked her if she'd been writing in her journal, and though answering yes hadn't been a lie, she spent the

rest of that ride home feeling guilty as she remembered what the last entry had been:

*The feeling I get when I'm around Mike stays with me for a long time after. Whenever I think about him it makes me happy, and calm, even though I still feel guilty for letting it go this far and for lying. The last time I had a nightmare, when I woke up, I started thinking about our last conversation. And when I replayed it in my head it made the bad feelings go away, like they were never even there in the first place - and I've never had that happen before, not that quickly...*

Sometimes everything weighed on her so heavily that she wasn't sure she could hold it in anymore: both the lies to Hopper, and her rapidly growing feelings for Mike. El knew it was teetering on the edge of something risky, but she kept it together, desperate not to lose her evenings with him, those precious hours that brought her so much peace.

After unloading another box, she decided to go out and chat with him for a few minutes before starting the next one. She brushed off the front of her shirt, wishing yet again that she was wearing a nicer outfit.

Benny didn't enforce any kind of dress code, and El normally didn't mind her usual combination of a flannel shirt and faded thrift store jeans, but being around Mike made her wish she had something a little more... impressive. But asking Hopper for a different set of clothes would definitely seem suspicious, so she just had to hope that Mike didn't care too much about that kind of stuff.

After adjusting herself a little bit more, she headed out to the front.

Mike had his head bent over a textbook, but when she made it to the counter he looked up, smiling the same way he had every time she'd appeared that night: like he was relieved to have her back.

"How's it going back there?"

"Pretty good," El replied, "I'm just about done."

"Oh, that's good." Mike clasped his hands together, leaning over the

counter a little. "Um, do you - do you have a second?"

El knew she should tell him that she didn't, but the way he was looking at her kept her rooted in place. "Yeah, sure."

"Okay, great. Because I - I wanted to ask..." he trailed off, glancing down at the counter as his cheeks flushed red. "Have you ever been to the Palace Arcade?"

El's stomach sank. She knew where this was going, and there was nothing to do but face it; say no and disappoint him, nudge him again toward giving up.

"No, I haven't," she replied, gripping the front of her apron nervously.

To her dismay Mike's eyes lit up, like that was exactly what he hoped she'd say.

"Oh, well it's this super cool place - I'm not sure if you like arcade games, but they're a lot of fun, and they have a whole bunch of different ones, so I'm sure you could find one you like. And it's... yeah, it's great there."

He paused and El squeezed her apron tighter, wishing he would stop almost as badly as she wanted him to continue.

"Anyway, I - I wanted to know if... if you wanted to go there, with me? On Saturday?"

*Shit, shit, shit.* El's mind went blank and she frowned, scrambling for words to fill the awkward pause. "You mean like.... like, a date?"

El resisted the urge to cover her face with her hands in embarrassment — she was almost positive that's what he meant, but the small bit of doubt had won over, the desire to be absolutely sure before she had to say the thing she *really* didn't want to say.

Mike's eyes widened a little and he blinked a few times, like her words had roused him from a dream. "Yeah, um - like a date. Or not *like* a date, but a date," he said. "A real date," he mumbled a moment later, almost too quiet for El to hear.

He looked so nervous, his eyes meeting hers cautiously, like he was bracing himself for her answer. She had to look away, knowing her face would convey something different than her words.

"I appreciate the invite," she began, rehearsing the answer she'd come up with on that night he'd asked about *Ghostbusters*. "But I - I'm not allowed to go on dates. Or, um, date...at all."

Saying it was almost painful, and El glanced down to see that her hands were shaking.

Mike raised his eyebrows, clearly not expecting that answer. He was visibly disappointed, his shoulders sagging as he leaned back on his stool.

"Oh, I see," he replied, "That's, um - that's okay. I understand."

For some reason his words made it hurt even more, and El mumbled something about needing to finish up in the back before she hurried away to the storage area.

She barely made it there before the tears began to slip out, and despite her efforts to hold off, everything came rushing out as she slid onto the floor, hugging her knees to her chest as she cried silently.

She hated that she was right about Mike wanting more, hated that it didn't change the fact that nothing could happen between them. It was right there, so close; the chance for all the things she'd been dreaming about to become real, just out of reach.

She drew in a shaky breath, knowing that if she kept crying it could make for an awkward encounter with Benny. Wiping under her eyes as much as she could, she stood back up and turned to another one of the delivery boxes, hoping she'd be able to lose herself in the work and forget about it, at least for the time being.

She began to numbly sort things into their respective places, trying to shake off the feeling of Mike's presence, the awareness of him just beyond the door. She couldn't go back out there, not yet — she wasn't confident she could face him without the truth of what she felt written all over her face.

*I'll wait an hour*, she decided. He'd probably be gone by then.

---

The textbook before him might as well have been written in Greek, based on how much Mike was failing to absorb the material.

*I'm not allowed to go on dates.*

He told El that he understood, but he wasn't sure he really did. Sure, some people had strict parents, and maybe hers were super religious or something, which would certainly fit with the fact that she was homeschooled. But that couldn't be the reason — it felt like something that would've come up by now, even with how cagey El was about her background.

What he was struggling to understand was whether or not she'd just used it as an excuse not to go on a date with him.

Despite his lingering insecurities, so much of him believed that wasn't the case; it was the way she bit her lip, like she was holding something back, and how the words she said sounded so... rehearsed. But she'd hurried away from him as soon as it was over, so Mike wasn't able to get a good read on what she was really thinking anyway.

To make matters worse, it had been over half an hour now and she still hadn't returned from the back, which led Mike to think she was avoiding him. And that really sucked, because within that time, he'd come up with a solution that might still be able to make the arcade work, and as poor as the outlook seemed, he still wanted to give it a try.

He wasn't ready to give up just yet.

It felt similar to when he'd decided to give it one last try on that second visit by asking her if he could sit at the counter to talk to her. This time, he sensed the same disappointment in her voice, that hollow tone that suggested she felt something different than what she said.

He could only hope he was right, because what he was beginning to

feel for El... it was too strong to walk away from.

He checked his watch to find that he only had fifteen minutes until the diner technically closed. He made some halfhearted attempts to return to his homework, but it was useless; his heart thrummed nervously, his palms sweaty as he kept his eyes trained on the kitchen door, waiting for El.

Finally, with just a minute to spare, she emerged.

She stopped just before she reached the counter, clearly surprised that he was still there.

*She probably thinks you're desperate*, Mike thought as he slid off the stool. Whether that was true or not, he was intent on following through with his plan.

"Hey, um, I - I'm glad you came back out," he said, stuttering over his words. Her presence alone made him question what the hell he was thinking. "I wanted to ask something else, about... about the arcade."

El's eyes searched his face, hesitant. "Okay," she said softly.

"What if I asked my friends to come along?" Mike began, "They're really nice, I promise - I know you'll get along with them. And that way, it won't be a date. It'll just be... you know, a friend thing."

Mike hoped it sounded convincing. He wanted more than friendship with El, of course, but if for whatever reason that was her boundary, then he would accept it — as long as it meant he still got to be around her.

"A friend thing?"

It didn't seem like something that needed further explanation, but Mike nodded in response anyway. "Yeah, I mean, since you're not allowed to date, I thought - well, I... I was hoping we could still be friends? If that's okay?"

El smiled at that, but her eyes were still distant, like her mind was somewhere else when she looked at him.

"Um, yeah - we can be friends," she said, and Mike swore there was a lilt of sadness in her words. "I'll just have to ask about the arcade. But I can let you know, on Thursday?"

It was a far better outcome than Mike expected and he nodded enthusiastically, grinning at her. "Yeah, of course - no problem."

They looked at each other for a lingering moment, Mike sensing that there was more she wanted to say.

He checked his watch again before gesturing to the door. "I better head out, let you guys close up."

El watched silently as he began to pack up his things.

"I'll see you Thursday," she said as he pulled on his coat.

"Thursday," he replied, smiling at her one more time before turning away.

---

*'A friend thing'... hmm, I wonder how well that's going to work out for these two.*

*I realize that things have been moving pretty slowly thus far, but everything ticks up a notch in the next couple of chapters, and I hope you're all as excited as I am for it. I'm not normally one to make playlists for my fics, but there are two songs that I think perfectly capture the vibe of this story, so if that's something you're into, give 'North' by Clairo and 'Say It' by Maggie Rogers a listen.*

*Come say hi to me on Tumblr at maplestreet, and as always, please leave your thoughts!*

## 5. Chapter 5

*Guest (who mentioned they'd read this as a full length novel): That's a huge compliment, thank you so much! It's popped into my head periodically since and made me smile each time. I'm so glad you're enjoying this story and hope you like what's to come :)*

*disneyprincess315: Thank you for another lovely review! El's back story is one of the things I've enjoyed thinking/writing about the most so far in this fic - it's not that different from canon, but it's been a fun challenge to imagine how she might've escaped if she was in the lab much longer than in the show. Thanks again!*

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"You said you only talked to him a *little bit*."

"I did! I mean, at - at first. But there were times when he was the only customer there, and I don't know... we just kind of - we started chatting. Casually."

"And this casual chatting was enough for him to ask you on a date?"

El groaned, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "I told you, it's *not* a date. It's a 'friend thing', like he said."

Hopper scoffed and shook his head. "Teenage boys will say a lot of bullshit things, El, trust me."

"Not Mike," El blurted, "He's not like that. We can trust him."

She watched as Hopper considered this, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

It was Wednesday morning. El had been too nervous to ask him about the arcade the night before, and she'd finally worked up the courage at breakfast, as they both sat hunched over plates of Eggos.

Hopper narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. "You think you know him well enough to trust him?"

El put her fork down, mustering up her most serious glare. "It's an

instinct. A feeling."

"A feeling? We can't take risks just because of a *feeling*."

El sighed and pushed her plate away. She stretched a hand out, reaching across the table with her palm upturned. Hopper glanced down at it, skeptical for a moment before he gave in, meeting her halfway and folding her hand into his.

"Hop," she said gently, "It's been more than six months now. There's been no sign of any of them. *Zero*. And my - my powers haven't come back either," she said, a familiar dread coming over her at the thought. "How much longer do we have to keep this up? I have to... I have to start doing normal things at some point."

"You're right, kid," Hop replied, "But I was thinking more along the lines of a trip to the grocery store. Not a date with Mike Wheeler."

"It's *not* a date, how many times -"

But he shook his head, holding up his free hand to stop her. "Even if it's just a *friend thing*, or whatever he claims, it's not that simple. What if they invite you out to something else after this, huh? And people start to notice you around town, and -"

"That probably won't even happen," El interjected, "I don't even know if they'll like me or not."

"I have no doubt they will, kid, that's not the problem - the problem is you getting close to people." He pursed his lips, studying her face before he spoke again. "You can't make friends the same way they can."

His words shouldn't have stung that much — he was only speaking the truth, reiterating the internal battle El already had with herself after each conversation with Mike. Still, she felt her eyes begin to cloud with tears and she shoved her chair back, getting up from the table as quickly as possible.

Hopper stood too, following her as she made a beeline for her bedroom. "Hey, El - come on, I didn't mean -"

"Yes you did," she snapped, whipping around to face him. "You did mean it, and you're right — I can never have real friends. I can never go out on a Saturday and do normal things... I can never even *be* normal, I - I..."

Her words dissolved into tears and she buried her face in her hands, angry with herself for getting so upset.

Hopper was in front of her in a few strides, and she let herself be pulled into his arms, grateful for the familiar comfort. She knew she shouldn't be angry at him. It wasn't his fault, really — he just wanted to keep her safe, even when that meant reminding her of harsh realities.

After a while he nudged her, and she leaned back as he placed his hands on her shoulders, looking at her with reassuring eyes.

"Hey, listen to me," he said as El sniffled, wiping her eyes on her shirtsleeve. "I want you to have a normal life, and friends, and all that stuff. Trust me, I do. This is just... it's scary, alright? I'm scared of what could happen, that's all."

El nodded, his words making her want to cry even more.

He wrapped an arm around her again, kissing the top of her head. "I have to think about Saturday," he murmured, "Just give me until tonight, alright?"

It wasn't the answer El was hoping for, but it was progress. She craned her neck to look up at him, hoping her eyes could convey how much she wanted this, how right she was about Mike, and about trusting him.

"Okay."

---

"Are you sure she's not like, really Christian or something? Like one of those people that goes around knocking on doors and stuff, asking if you want to get saved?"

Mike gripped the steering wheel tighter. He was already on edge, and Dustin's relentless questions weren't helping.

He was mulling over a response when Will chimed in from the backseat. "I think Mike would know by now if she was, Dustin. It's not *that* weird - some parents just don't allow dating until you're older, that's all."

Max leaned forward onto the center console, and Mike could see her grinning from his peripheral vision. "I think it's kind of romantic," she said, "Forbidden love, and all that."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Please don't start with that again."

"What? I'm just pointing out -" she began, but Lucas must've given her a look, because her words cut off abruptly.

El had asked Mike to pick her up at Benny's, and it made more sense to drop everyone off at the arcade first before going to get her. It worked out well, because Mike didn't want El's introduction to the Party to be during a cramped car ride, which had way too much potential to get out of hand and scare her off.

He pulled up to the Palace Arcade's front doors, idling as his friends clambered out. "Meet us by the pinball machines!" he called to them out the window.

Lucas turned back to give him a thumbs up. "If you don't return," he shouted, "We'll assume you're off somewhere sucking face!"

Mike just scoffed, too distracted to bother with a response. He looped back out of the parking lot and turned in the direction of the diner.

He couldn't help but feel excited to have a moment alone with El, even though he knew he shouldn't be. He'd been the one to make the distinction that it was just a friend thing, after all, and he vowed to stay within those parameters, but still... it didn't make his feelings for her any less prevalent.

*I can do this*, he told himself, nervous energy coursing through his body as he got closer to Benny's. *I can be her friend.*

*Right?*

---

Mike was wearing *the* sweater: the beige one with the green pattern across the chest. The one that was so cozy looking, it had caused El to get lost in a daydream in the middle of a conversation with him — a daydream about being wrapped up in his arms.

She kept stealing glances at him as he drove, keenly aware that sitting in his passenger's seat was the closest she'd ever been to him. That awareness formed an energy within the car, a heaviness that made El feel short of breath, like the volume was turned up on all of her senses.

The urge to reach out and touch the sleeve of his sweater — to find out for herself just how cozy it was — was so overwhelming that she tucked her hands under her knees, not trusting her own self restraint.

She tuned into what Mike was saying about his friends. He'd been giving her a short description of each member of what he called the 'Party', which was a term from a game El had never heard of.

"...and the thing about Dustin is that he's *super* funny, but he definitely loves to tease everyone, so watch out for that, I guess."

"Dustin - teasing. Got it," El replied, relieved to see that it made Mike smile.

They pulled up to a stoplight, and when he looked at her that invisible energy pressed closer, her heart fluttering in her chest.

"I'm really glad you could make it," he said, and El swore she detected the same shortness of breath in his voice.

She waited until he started driving again to reply. "Me too," she said quietly.

Mike laughed a little. "Now that sounded *very* convincing."

El squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, willing her nerves to dissipate enough so that she could at least act normal. Mike had no idea how big of a deal this was for her — getting to go out in public freely, meet up with friends like it was something she did all the time.

"I'm sorry - I really am glad, I promise," she blurted, trying to read Mike's expression from the corner of her eye. "I'm just... nervous."

She hadn't planned on telling him that, but as was the pattern when she was around Mike, it felt like the right thing.

"Nervous?" he repeated, keeping his eyes straight ahead. "That's fair, I mean you are meeting new people and all, but... there's no reason to be, trust me. Besides, my friends are excited to meet you."

El turned to him, glad that he wasn't able to catch the look of surprise on her face. In the fading light she could see that he was blushing, biting his lip like he hadn't intended to say that much. *I know the feeling*, El thought.

She didn't want to further his embarrassment, but her curiosity won over. "They know about me?"

Mike's blush deepened. "Uh, yeah, I've talked - um, yeah, they know about you."

El couldn't help the smile that spread across her face, and she turned back to look out the window, a brimming excitement now mingling with her nerves. She imagined Mike talking to his friends about her with the same effervescence he showed in their conversations at Benny's. Though she'd vowed not to get her hopes up — this *was* supposed to be a friend thing, like he said — the thought still filled her with a familiar warmth.

They drove on in silence for a few minutes before Mike cleared his throat. "If you do feel nervous though, or uncomfortable, and you want to leave, or take a break, just let me know, okay?" he said, his voice cautious, gentle. "You can like, tap me on the arm or something. It'll be our signal."

"Signal?" El asked, frowning.

"Yeah, a signal - just between us."

Something within El shifted then, like an internal key had been twisted into the right lock. Though simple, his words implied that he would look out for her; that he'd protect her, even if he didn't know

the full extent of what that meant. She tried to steady her breathing, confused at the wave of emotion that had suddenly come over her.

Mike looked at her, shaking her from her thoughts.

"Sound good?" he asked, flashing a shy smile.

She nodded, smiling back. "Sounds good."

The arcade was a sensory overload, and for El it felt magnified by a thousand.

It hit like a hard shove as she took everything in: the neon-patterned rug beneath her feet, the high-pitched pinging sounds coming from every direction, the poster collage covering the walls. She scanned the room, relieved to see that it wasn't too busy; it was mostly filled with people that looked to be her age or younger, all of them grouped around different machines.

She felt a hand brush her ribcage and she flinched, turning to find Mike looking down at her, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "All good?"

El managed to nod, her side still tingling from where he'd touched her. "Yeah, sorry - I'm good."

"Cool, right?"

El looked around again before smiling up at him. "Very cool."

She followed as he led her to a row of machines that all looked similar. Mike waved to a group of four people standing at the side of one of them, and El assumed it was the Party.

One of the boys, whose curly brown hair was spilling out from under a red and blue hat, spoke up as they approached. "You made it just in time," he said, a wide grin taking up his whole face, "Lucas and I were on the verge of beating Max's high score in Dig Dug."

The only other girl standing with them immediately reached over and gave the boy a light punch in the arm. She had long red hair that El instantly thought was beautiful, and her bright blue eyes narrowed as

the boy winced in pain. "In your *dreams*, Henderson."

"Geez, Max, just because you're losing your touch doesn't mean you need to resort to violence."

"I swear, Dustin, if you say one more -"

"*Ahem*, guys," it was Mike, interjecting with an authority that quieted them right away. "I want you to meet - um... this is El," he said, gesturing to her briefly.

She felt her face heat up as the group of them turned to look at her. "Hi," she said softly.

"As you probably guessed based on what I told you, this is Dustin," Mike said, pointing to the boy with the curly hair.

He gave El the same big grin. "All good things, I hope?"

She was about to respond but Mike went on, motioning to the shorter boy next to Dustin, who seemed shy but smiled at her kindly. "That's Will, and then that's Lucas, and Max."

Lucas, a handsome boy who was almost as tall as Mike, looped an arm around Max, and her anger towards Dustin seemed to dissipate. "Nice to meet you, El," she said, smiling, "Glad someone else is here to witness me take down these nerds."

That made El laugh, and she glanced around at all of them. "Nice to meet all of you, too."

There was a pause, and then Mike clapped his hands together. "Alright," he said with that same authoritative tone, "Are we just going to stand around all night, or what?"

It was clear that Mike held some kind of leadership over the group, because they all sprung into action at his words, heading over to a set of machines emblazoned with the words *DIG DUG* in bright red letters. Dustin and Lucas sidled up to one machine and Max set up next to them, with Will, El and Mike standing back to watch.

"Just a fair warning, El, this usually gets pretty heated," Will said,

giving her an apologetic shrug.

Mike crouched down a little next to her, cupping his hand near her ear. "Lucas and Dustin have been closing in on Max lately," he murmured, "And she's the Palace's reigning champion, so it's kind of a big deal."

The feeling of Mike's breath against her neck made El shiver, leaving her too distracted to respond. She thought the heady sensation of being close to him would've dissipated once they left the car, but instead it only got more intense, and she longed for him to have something else secretive to say so he could whisper in her ear again.

The three of them watched as the game started, Max pressing buttons and levers in a concentrated silence as Lucas and Dustin whooped and hollered, collaborating with a practiced precision.

El looked on in amazement, her eyes darting between them as Will and Mike began cheering. She could tell how normal this was, how comfortable they were with each other, and it made her heart swell — this must be what it was like to have friends, to have people whose very presence made bad things seem a little farther away.

Though El couldn't tell who was winning, the game seemed decided when Max raised her hands above her head, stepping back from the machine with a triumphant grin. "Take that, nerd squad!" she shouted as the noises on Lucas and Dustin's machine began to die down.

The two boys looked at each other, shrugging with palpable disappointment. "Your girlfriend's a monster," Dustin muttered, and Max's eyes widened in fury.

"*I heard that*," she seethed as she moved towards him, "You better watch out before -"

But Lucas caught her in his arms before she got any further, lifting her off her feet. He gestured to the rest of the room, like he was showing her off. "My queen!" he said loudly, causing a group of kids next to them to turn and look, "The reigning champion!"

Max's face flushed red, and she squirmed out of Lucas's grasp as the

rest of the Party groaned and shook their heads, like it was a typical routine. El just smiled, unable to help imagining Mike doing something like that to her — holding her close and not caring that people were looking, wanting everyone to know they were together.

Dustin looked particularly unamused, muttering "*Traitor*," under his breath as Lucas set Max back down.

Max smoothed her hair, a light blush lingering on her cheeks. "So, now that *that's* settled," she said, motioning to where El was standing, "You wanna give it a try, El?"

El instinctively looked up at Mike, who met her with reassuring eyes. She *did* want to try, but she was too nervous to do so in front of the whole group, sure that they'd be able to tell how foreign everything was to her — but she wasn't sure how to communicate this. So, as discreetly as she could, she reached a hand behind Mike and tapped him on the arm, just like he'd explained in the car.

He frowned at her for a second before the realization dawned on him, and, like he was reading El's mind, he stepped away from the group, beckoning the boys to follow him.

"Come on, let's go check if they finally fixed the Pac-Man machine," he said, nodding at Max, "Gotta give the champion some space to pass along her wisdom."

They were out of sight a few moments later, and although El was grateful not to have an audience, she still felt nervous standing there in front of Max.

But it was like Max could sense this, and she waved a hand at the spot next to her. "Come on up," she said, smiling warmly, "Let me show you how it's done."

El did as she said, watching as Max reset the game by pushing some coins into a slot below.

"Alright, so the whole thing is that you're in this maze," she began, "And you have to work your way through and destroy these tomato-looking things, and some fire-breathing dragons, but don't worry —

we'll get there."

She demonstrated which buttons and levers to use and when, guiding El as she took control and listened intently to the instructions.

Before long she was picking up speed, buoyed by Max's persistent encouragement. "There you go," she kept saying, "You got this - yep, that's it, crush those suckers!"

El couldn't stop giggling, entertained by Max's commentary and giddy with the feeling of being rewarded by the game, her fingers fumbling over the buttons. She didn't make it nearly as far as anyone else had, but still, when it came to an end Max turned to her excitedly, lifting her hand for a high-five.

"You're a natural," she said, "A little more practice, and we can team up and absolutely *destroy* Lucas and Dustin."

El laughed, her heart soaring with a happiness that filled her entire body, something she instinctively understood as a feeling of belonging; of being part of something, however small.

"That was fun," El said breathlessly, "Thanks."

"Anytime," Max replied, leaning back against the machine next to her. "I'm just glad to finally meet the girl that's got Wheeler all out of sorts."

*What?*

A nervous jolt shot down El's spine, and though she tried not to let it show, she could tell by Max's smirk that shock was written all over her face. "Wh-what do you mean?"

Max crossed her arms, studying El momentarily. "I mean, I've known that kid since eighth grade, and I've never seen him like this over anyone before - not even *close*."

El glanced at the floor, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from breaking into an expression that would give everything away. Though she sensed that she could trust Max, a faint voice in the back of her mind reminded her of the line she was supposed to stay

behind: *a friend thing*.

"Oh," she replied, barely above a whisper.

Max laughed, ducking her head a little and forcing El to look up.

"El, that's a *good thing*. He's happier than I've seen him in a long time, and with everything that's been going on with his parents..." she trailed off and though El was curious, she could tell it was something private.

Her heart sank, thinking of what Mike had going on beneath the surface. Though she'd sensed it before, she was angry for never trying to comfort him, for allowing the rules to keep her from doing what was right.

"Anyway," Max continued, "You should see the way he is when he talks about you. He lights up like a friggin' Christmas tree."

El laughed; her whole face was totally red now, and there was no point trying to hide it. She thought back to how embarrassed Mike had been in the car after mentioning that the Party knew about her, and she couldn't help the thrill of knowing that what she'd imagined was true.

She wasn't sure what to say in response, so she just smiled at Max again. "I, um... thanks," she muttered.

"Anytime. Just - don't tell him I said that, okay? I have a reputation to uphold among those nerds."

They both laughed at that, Max glancing back to where the boys were standing.

"So, you and Lucas," El began when she turned around, "How long have you been together?"

"Hmm, it's been..." Max trailed off, frowning to herself for a split second. "Almost three years now, actually."

"Wow," El breathed, and her wondrous expression must've been obvious, because Max burst into laughter again at the sight of it.

"Yeah, I know right?" she replied, shaking her head, "Can't believe it's been that long."

El smiled. "You must really love each other."

Max smirked at her, like she was trying to read what El meant by that.

"Yeah, we do. He gets on my nerves sometimes, of course," she said, rolling her eyes. "I mean, you saw that embarrassing display earlier."

El frowned. "I thought that was sweet of him."

Max's eyes widened, her jaw dropping slightly. "Sweet? Well, clearly we have different definitions of romance."

El laughed, and before she could stop herself, she blurted out the question that had come to her a few moments ago. "When did you know?"

Max tilted her head to the side, her brows pinching together. "When did I know what?"

"When you were in love with Lucas," El said, feeling shy suddenly, "I mean... when did you realize it."

That same curious expression made its way back onto Max's face as she studied El carefully. "Wow, you really don't do small talk, do you?"

*Shit.* El bit her lip, squeezing her eyes shut for a second. "Oh - I'm sorry Max, I didn't mean to - I know that's probably personal, I just -"

She stopped when she felt Max place a hand on her forearm. "*Relax* El, I'm kidding. I like that you just cut through all the bullshit. It's refreshing."

The redhead looked at her with reassuring eyes, an amused smile on her lips. "And to answer your question, I mean, I've never really thought about it before," she went on, "But I'd say it was a few months after we started dating. I just started to feel so... calm around him, you know? Like even the worst day wasn't really *that* bad,

because I had him. It was - yeah, just that feeling of being totally at peace, I guess."

El nodded, because although she had zero experience compared to Max, she understood that feeling — and it had to do with the tall, dark-haired boy standing not too far away.

"Any reason you're asking?"

El's heart skipped a beat, and she avoided Max's eyes, sure that she'd be able to see right through her.

"No," she lied, shrugging, "You two are really cute together, I was... just curious."

"Well, thanks. But don't tell him I said that either, okay? Doesn't hurt to keep him on his toes sometimes."

El smiled, meeting her eyes briefly. "I won't, I promise."

That mischievous smile was still on Max's lips, but she seemed to let whatever was on her mind go as she turned to gesture at the machine.

"What do you say we go for another round?"

El nodded in agreement, and a moment later Max was feeding the machine with more coins, egging El on as she turned to give the game another shot.

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"Mike, would you stop creeping on them? They're fine, they're having *fun*."

Mike turned around so quickly at the sound of Lucas's voice that he nearly gave himself whiplash. He'd been craning his neck around the corner toward where Max and El were still playing Dig Dug, but clearly he hadn't been as discreet as he thought.

"I know, I just - I just wanted to make sure El's okay, that's all." He shoved his hands in his pockets and started to rock back and forth on his feet, another one of his nervous habits.

"Look, Mike," Lucas began, raising an eyebrow, "I know you told her it was just a 'friend thing' or whatever, but it is *painfully* obvious that you're in love with her."

Mike's head snapped up, his throat going dry as he scanned his friend's faces. "What!? That - that's ridiculous, I can't - I'm not in *love* with her, we barely -"

But Lucas wasn't having it, and Will and Dustin's silence suggested that they weren't either.

"Save it, okay? You'd have to be an *idiot* not to see it, and -"

"Oh what, so you're saying I'm -"

"No, I'm not saying you're an idiot — not this time, anyway — I was *going* to say, it's clear that she feels the same way."

Mike stood there, dumbfounded, heart hammering against his ribcage as he tried to process Lucas's words. He looked quizzically at Will and Dustin, but their smug expressions told him that they agreed.

Being exposed for his evident feelings for El was one thing, but the assertion that she felt the same was something else. Mike had convinced himself that the signs he'd noticed — the way she blushed whenever they got close, or how sometimes she looked at him like his eyes held some kind of secret — were all in his head, a result of what he longed for deep down. And even though he was inclined to believe his friends were teasing him, it was clear they saw *something* there, something that was more than friendly.

Still, he shook his head, remembering grimly that even if they were right, nothing was going to come of it, anyway — not anything driven by him, at least. He didn't know what circumstances El was facing, but he had to respect it if he wanted there to be a chance that whatever was brewing between them could potentially become more.

"Even if that's true..." Mike began, still looking down at the floor. "You heard what I said before - she's not allowed to date."

Lucas scoffed. "Yeah, and I also heard what Max said: *forbidden love*. It's romantic."

Mike groaned, pressing his palms against his eyes in frustration. "Oh god, not you too," he murmured.

He dropped his hands and met Lucas's eyes, his next words coming out with a warning tone. "I don't want to push her, though. Or like, make things weird... or whatever."

"I mean, yeah, admitting your feelings could definitely make it weird," Lucas replied, "But don't you think it's worth a shot?"

*Of course*, Mike thought to himself, but he kept it in, just shrugging in response.

It was Dustin who spoke next, stepping toward Mike to clap a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You know what they say, Paladin. You'll never know unless you try."

Mike smiled in spite of himself, swatting Dustin's hand away.

"Yeah, well," he said, glancing back toward Max and El, "I just hope Max hasn't ruined my chances up front by saying something embarrassing."

The three of them burst into laughter, and Mike's heart sank, knowing the answer before Lucas could get to it.

"I wouldn't count on that, Mike," he managed to reply once the laughing died down.

Mike kept his eyes on El, her back turned as she played another round of Dig Dug. He imagined the way her eyes were probably lighting up, transfixed on the game, and he bit his lip to keep from grinning.

He was glad to see that she was having fun, even with the risk of Max saying something embarrassing. And the fact that she seemed to fit so naturally into this part of his life only made his feelings for her deepen, affirming the sense he'd already had that everything about being around her just felt *right*.

Dustin's words echoed in his mind: *You'll never know unless you try*. He hadn't let himself think about what trying might look like, sure that

those ideas had to be pushed away, or else he'd risk losing El entirely.

But looking at her then, he could feel that resistance beginning to slip. The idea of crossing over the arbitrary line he'd imposed made him nervous, but he realized then that not knowing might be worse.

Maybe he wouldn't cross it, not entirely. Maybe he'd just step forward a little, extending a hand to wherever El stood, however far along she was to realizing the feelings she might have for him. Maybe she'd reach out too, and they'd find out where the middle was, together.

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*Apologies if that was a weird place to end it, but based on the pacing/layout of the next chapter, it's what worked best. Also, when I say \*the\* sweater, I'm referring to the one Mike wears in season 2, episode 3 ("The Pollywog"), when they're all at the school looking for Dart - that was one of his best outfits of the whole series, I take no criticisms.*

*Please leave reviews! I'm very grateful to the few people who leave one on each chapter, but judging by how many follows/favourites this story has so far, there should be a lot more. It would really mean a lot if you took a minute or two to let me know your impressions, predictions, moments you liked/disliked and why, etc. Thanks for reading! :)*